

History And How Much The Qur'an Is Concerned With It

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Oral and written history has been the favourite subject of people since the beginning of humanity. So far as we are aware, there have always been some persons who remembered, wrote or otherwise transmitted the great and small events of the past to the generations who came later, and who preserved what they were given by the ancients. Mankind benefits from history in various fields of his life: society comes to know its origin; people take lessons from the achievements and failures of the past generations; events are used as stories, for information and amusement; political, economic and industrial guide-lines are charted out in the light of the experience of the past.

In spite of all these benefits, which in themselves would be enough to bestow on history a halo of virtuosity, two factors have always worked to divert it from the path of truth and reality:

First: History has always been a slave of the rulers of the time. Every government wants to advertise what is beneficial to it and to suppress the report of what may be harmful to its interests. It keeps its dark side either completely hidden or alters its details and presents falsehood disguised as truth.

Second: Even the historians, reporters, narrators and writers of the books of history can never be free from their feelings and prejudice. In the past, the historians and the governments were, on the whole,

people who believed in one or another religion, and at that time, religious prejudice and national feelings tainted historical writings. Now-a-days, materialism and nationalism occupy the same place, and the reports of past and present events are seen through these glasses. Ancient writers seldom wrote anything that could damage the religious faith of their contemporaries. Modern writers seldom write anything without injecting into it some items to support their materialistic view.

Apart from these two basic factors, there were and are other difficulties which have put history into disrepute. In the old times, there were scarcely any tools to record, preserve, transmit, copy, edit and preserve historical material. Now, with the progress of technology, all such tools are in the hands of historians; but a new enemy has overpowered them, and that is professional politics. The same event is reported in ten or twenty ways, depending on the nationality and political leaning of the reporters.

These glaring defects have robbed written history of its value. Now scholars have more confidence in archaeological evidence than in written records. Even in that field, national feelings and prejudice play their part. And politics dictate how much should be disclosed, and even what interpretation should be put on archaeological discoveries.

So, this is history and its various defects which can never be glossed over or corrected. With this background, we should never compare the historical events mentioned in the Qur'an, with the narrations of the same events given in the books of history. The Qur'an is a divine revelation, free from mistake and falsehood. How can it be judged with the help of history, the history which nobody believes to be free from lie and error? Many historical events, as given in the Qur'an, like this very story of Talut, differ from the reports in the Bible. But why should we worry? The Bible is no better than other history books; The alterations, suppressions, additions and omissions carried out in these books are too well-known to need any description. The story of Samuel and Saul was written in the Bible by an unknown hand. The story of Talut in the Qur'an is the true words of Allah.

This much about history in general. Now let us see what is the main object of the Qur'an in such narrations. The Qur'an is not a book of history, nor does it describe an event with all its details as a book of history purports to do. The Qur'an is divine speech, poured into the mould of revelation:

“With it Allah guides him who follows His pleasure into the ways of safety” (5: 16).

That is why it does not narrate an event from the beginning to the end with all its details. It only picks out a few such points of an event as will be useful to the listener as a lesson, sermon and moral. Look for example at this very story. It begins with the words, “Did you not see the chiefs of the children of Israel”, and then picks out the following points as highlights:

“And their prophet said to them: Surely Allah has raised Talut to be a king over you” (2:247);

“And their prophet said to them, Surely the sign of his kingdom is ...” (2:248);

“So when Talut departed” (2:249);

“And when they went out against Goliath ...” (2:250).

Obviously if one wants to write the fully story of Talut, one will have to add many paragraphs between all these highlights. But the Qur'an is not interested in a story per se.

We have mentioned this fact in the story of the cow, and this principle applies to all other Qur'anic stories. It selects for description only that much which is needed to stress some points in moral lessons, wise teachings and spiritual guidance, or to show how Allah dealt with ancient nations and the people who passed away before the Muslims. Allah says:

In their stories there is certainly a lesson for men of understanding (12: 111).

Allah desires to explain to you, and to guide you into the ways of those before you (4:26).

Indeed, there have been examples before you; therefore, travel in the earth and see what was the end of the rejectors” (3: 137).

This is a clear statement for men who guard (against evil) (3: 138).

There are many similar verses.

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