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The Function of Asbab al-Nuzul in Qur'anic Exegesis

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In John Wansbrough's work, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, several theses are put forth regarding the material known as *asbab al-nuzul*, 'occasions of revelation'. The overall view of Wansbrough is one which is derived (critically) from al-Suyuti,[1] which is that the *asbab* material has its primary reference point in works devoted to deriving law from the text of the Qur'an, that is, halakhic (collective body of Jewish religious laws) works. He suggests that the presence of *asbab* material as found in a haggadic (book read by Jews on the first night of Passover) or narrative *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis) such as that of Muqatil is 'accidental' because, while the narrative *asbab* reports serve as anecdotes, they do not fulfil what Wansbrough sees as the 'essential function,' that of establishing 'a chronology of revelation'.[2]

The purpose of this study is to pursue a specialised investigation of this function of the *asbab* in exegesis: to pose the fairly straightforward question of what are the *asbab* narratives designed to accomplish? Are they providing history or exegesis? Is that exegesis haggadic or halakhic in character? The question is to be addressed both in terms of direct literary analysis of the narratives themselves and by looking at the use of the material within texts of exegesis. The questions to be posed in this vein are the following: why within the context of a work such as that of al-Tabari is *asbab al-nuzul* material adduced? What is the exegete's purpose in doing so? What does he hope to accomplish by doing so? What does he do with the material after adducing it? The framework of the investigation is limited to that of exegesis of the Qur'an written by Sunni authors in Arabic from the early (i.e., pre -6th-century *hijri*) period primarily (although not exclusively), when the literary techniques of exegesis were fairly uncomplicated and uncluttered.

The range of exegetical works surveyed includes the early narrative-haggadic types, those of Muqatil (d. 150 AH / 767 CE), pseudo al-Kalbi (d. 146 AH / 763 CE),[3] Sufyan al-Thawri (d. 161 AH / 777 CE), Mujahid (d. 104 AH / 772 CE), 'Abd al-Razzaq (d. 211 AH / 826 CE), al-Tabari (d. 310 AH / 922 CE), and al-Wahidi (d. 468 AH / 1075 CE), the legal-halakhic *ahkam* works, those of Muqatil again, al-Jassas (d. 370 AH / 981 CE), Ibn al-'Arabi



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(d. 543 AH / 1148 CE) and al-Qurtubi (d. 671AH / 1272 CE), and the *naskh* 'abrogation' texts of al-Nahhas (d. 338 AH / 949 CE), Hibat Allah (d. 410 AH / 1019 CE), al-Baghdadi (d. 429 AH / 1037 CE) and Makki al-Qaisi (d. 437 AH / 1045 CE).

The point of employing these three sub-genres of *tafsir* for the investigation is simply because they have been suggested within the context of previous discussions of the role of *asbab al-nuzul* in exegesis primarily as found in both of Wansbrough's recent works, *Qur'anic Studies* and *The Sectarian Milieu*, but also as indicated within the discussions of the topic by al-Zarkashi (d. 794 AH / 1391 CE) and al-Suyuti (d. 911AH / 1505 CE). Once again, the purpose of using these texts is to focus on an essentially literary question: why is the *asbab* material adduced within the context of these works? The results should provide an insight into the exegetical technique or method of literary interpretation employed by these exegetes.

Rather than go through all these texts looking for *asbab* reports, the study places its primary focus upon another exegetical sub-genre, called *asbab al-nuzul*, which is devoted to compiling these reports. Each time a report is cited in this literature as a *sabab* (pl. *asbab*, occasion) for a verse, the exegetical employment of that *sabab* has been checked within the *tafsir* literature. The study was limited to *sura 2* in the Qur'an which presented some 107 verses to be treated.

Sura 2 was selected because it contains a near ideal mix of Qur'anic material, with extensive narrative, polemical, exhortative and legal material. Ibn al-'Arabi, for example, treats over 80 verses out of the 286 in his *ahkam* text; al-Nahhas discusses 30 verses in the context of *naskh*. This kind of representative selection of verses is important because essentially the final result of the study is statistical; the overall aim of the study is to see which purposes behind adducing the *asbab* material predominate and which are subsidiary. While the precise proportions of the statistical result may well change somewhat if the entire Qur'an were treated in the same way, *sura 2*, being a representative cross-section of the whole, should produce fairly accurate results while at the same time not presenting the problem of prejudicing the whole issue by selective citation of verses which happen to be illustrative of certain traits preconceived to be crucial in the role of the *asbab*.



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Four *asbab al-nuzul* texts were employed in combination to act as the primary focus. The texts by al-Wahidi (d. 468 AH / 1075 CE) and al-Suyuti (d. 911 AH / 1505 CE) are famous and should need no further comment. The third text is by Muhammad (or Ahmad) ibn Asad al-‘Iraqi who died in 567 AH / 1171 CE or perhaps 667 AH / 1268 CE. Entitled *Asbab al-nuzul wa qisas al-furqaniyya*, it is contained in the manuscript copy held by the Chester Beatty Library (no. 5199). The fourth text is found in the Berlin Staatsbibliothek, catalogue no. 3578, and is ascribed to al-Ja‘bari; this ascription has been shown to be incorrect although no other likely writers have arisen to claim authorship. The manuscript itself was written in the year 709 AH.[4]

The actual definition of a *sabab* is a matter which has already been treated in another paper[5] but it is worth emphasising now that the term has definitely seen a measure of evolution over the years. Indeed, some of the reports studied would often be classified as *akhbar* rather than *asbab*, as al-Suyuti himself argues against al-Wahidi. Suffice it to say here that al-Wahidi did consider such reports to be *asbab al-nuzul* and for this study that is the important point, since the aim is to try to see what the exegetes thought, not whether their categories and understandings conform to our own. Al-Wahidi’s conception of a *sabab* seems to revolve around the phrase *al-aya nazalat fi hadha*, ‘the verse was revealed about such and such’ and the like; if a report contained the phrase, then it was *sabab*. Al-Suyuti disagreed.

One result of this study points to an essentially theological rather than literary result. On many occasions it seems that the *asbab* reports are adduced by the commentators for no reason at all; they are cited and then ignored. Of course, for the informed readership of such works, the simple mention of the report may well summon up the related background discussion. But, additionally, such reports are cited in these instances, out of a general desire to historicise the text of the Qur’an in order to be able to prove constantly that God really did reveal His book to humanity on earth; the material thereby acts as a witness to God’s concern for His creation.

Indeed al-Suyuti cites this as one of his understandings of the function of the *sabab*[6] and it seems to me to be quite true, and is a statement which underpins the entire phenomenon of the *sabab*. The *sabab* is the constant reminder of God and is the ‘rope’- that being one of the



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understood meanings of *sabab* in the Qur'an[7] - by which human contemplation of the Qur'an may ascend to the highest levels even while dealing with mundane aspects of the text.

The major literary exegetical role that the *sabab* plays, however, is what could be called a 'haggadically exegetical' function; regardless of the genre of exegesis in which the *sabab* is found, its function is to provide a narrative account in which the basic exegesis of the verse may be embodied. The standard interpretational techniques of incorporating glosses, masoretic clarification (e.g., with variants), narrative expansion and, most importantly, contextual definition predominate within the structure of the *sabab*.

Exegetical glosses provided with the narrative context of the *sabab* may be noted to occur quite frequently: as an example the following treatment of Q. 2:44 may be cited. The verse reads: 'Do you order right conduct for the people but forget yourselves while reciting the scripture? Will you not understand?' Al-Wahidi, al-Suyuti and Berlin 3578, all give the same basic report regarding this verse:

'The verse was revealed about the Jews of Medina. A certain man had said to his son-in-law and to his relatives and to those with him (and among them were some who were in foster relationship with the Muslims): "Be upright in your religion and in what this man - meaning Prophet Muhammad - orders you to do! Indeed his command is true?" So they had ordered the people to do that but they did not do it.' [8]

Embedded here is the gloss of the Qur'anic *birr*, 'right conduct' as the *sunna* of Prophet Muhammad. Even the Jews, this *sabab* seems to be arguing, acknowledged the legitimacy of the *sunna*, that is, following the orders of Prophet Muhammad, although, of course, in their hypocrisy they did not follow it. From the Muslim perspective, as reflected in the entire body of *tafsir*, here was the evidence of the major sin of the Jewish rabbis, summed up in the term *kitman*: the knowledge of the true status of Prophet Muhammad while concealing that fact in order to mislead the entire community.

Closely aligned to the lexical content of the *sabab* is the concern for more literary matters, as in the resolution of ellipsis in Q. 2:215: 'They are asking you: "What should they give?" Say:



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“Whatever you give of good, that is for parents, relatives, orphans, the poor and the followers of the way; whatever you do of good, God knows of it”.’

Al-Wahidi cites two reports for this verse, one of which is the following: ‘It was revealed about ‘Amr ibn al-Jumuh al-Ansari who was an old man and had a lot of money. He said: “What shall he [*sic*] give as alms [*bi madha yatasaddaqu*] and to whom shall he give (it) [*‘ala man yunfiq*].” So this verse was revealed.’[9]

The *sabab*, by employing the key words of the Qur’anic phraseology - *madha yunfiquna* - but dividing them into the two parts, serves to make explicit what could be considered as rather elliptical Qur’anic wording, where the question seems to be what to give but the reply more relevant to the question of to *whom* to give it.[10]

Disputes over masoretic matters such as variant readings have also left their trace in the *asbab* material. Q. 2:119 provides a vivid example of this: ‘Indeed we sent you with the truth as a bringer of good tidings and as a warner. You will not be questioned [*or Do not ask*] about the inhabitants of hell!’ As the translation indicates, two radically different interpretations of this verse can be suggested depending upon the reading of the text. The word in question *tas’al* is read according to the *qira’at* literature either in the first form, passive *tus’alu*, or in the first form imperative *tas’al*. [11] Accompanying these two readings are different *asbab*, each apparently designed to explicate the appropriate meaning and thereby confirm a choice of textual reading.

In explanation of the reading *tus’alu*, the following *sabab* is cited: ‘The Prophet said: “If God would reveal his strength to the Jews, they would believe.” So God revealed: “You will not be questioned about the inhabitants of hell!”’, i.e., they are not your responsibility.[12] Second, to support *tas’al*, the following report is adduced: ‘The Prophet said one day: “If only I knew what happened to my parents!” So this verse was revealed “Do not ask about the inhabitants of hell” ’[13] Al-Wahidi and Berlin 3578 give both of these *asbab*. [14]

Narrative expansion of a Qur’anic verse is a more frequent feature in the *sabab*, ranging from the most simple setting of the scene to a full elaboration, spinning an entire narrative structure



around a Qur'anic verse. Often such elaborations revolve around polemical motifs - disputation over sectarian emblems, over the respective values of each religious tradition, over merits of prophets and scriptures, over *tahrif*, *kitman* and hypocrisy. All these motifs, and many more, are familiar from Wansbrough's analysis of the *Sira* literature[15] and may be illustrated here by the treatment of Q. 2:130: 'Who could turn away from the religion of Abraham without his soul being foolish? Indeed, We choose him in the world, and in the hereafter he will be among the righteous.'

Al-Suyuti and Berlin 3578 quote a *sabab* for this verse, derived from Muqatil's *Tafsir* (according to Berlin 3578). "Abd Allah ibn Salam called his brother's two sons, Salama and Muhajir, to Islam. He said to them: "You know that God said in the Torah: 'I am sending from among the children of Ishmael a prophet named Ahmad. He who believes in him will be rightly guided and a true believer; he who does not believe in him will be cursed'." So Salama converted but Muhajir turned away. So God revealed... [2: 130].'[16] Exegesis of the verse is provided here with Muhajir obviously representing the foolish one and Salama the one who sticks with 'the religion of Abraham.'

More important in the *sabab*, it would seem, is the continual motif of Jewish rejection of the alleged prognosis of Muhammad/Ahmad in the Torah- that being the Qur'anic 'turning away' made equivalent here to *tahrif/kitman*. The verse is elaborated in a narrative form constructed around standard polemical motifs. It might also be noted that we seem to have an aetiological narrative here: Salama, the one who is safe, and Muhajir, the one who has left.

Other elaborations are not so much polemical as illustrative of the desire to create a good yarn: nowhere is this more apparent than in Q. 2:260 and Abraham's questioning. This verse states: 'Indeed, Abraham said: "Lord show me how you gave life to the dead!" He said: "Do you not believe?" (Abraham) said: "Why yes, but to satisfy my heart...!" He said: "Take four birds, then turn them to you. Then put a part of them in each hill and call them and they will come to you swiftly. Know that God is powerful and wise."' '

For the curious mind, a reading of this verse will raise many questions; it certainly did for the classical exegetes. One major question was what was Abraham supposed to do with the birds?



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Was he supposed to kill them and cut them up and scatter them around? This is certainly the most popular explanation, although the verse says nothing about killing the birds. Perhaps he was just supposed to take whole birds to the various hills and they would fly back. But wherein is the test in that interpretation? Another question revolves around God's statement, 'Do you not believe?' Did God not know whether Abraham believed? Another question, the one that the *asbab al-nuzul* information tries to answer, is why did Abraham ask the question to begin with? Why does Abraham need his heart to be satisfied? It is this situation to which God responds, sending down (*nuzul*) the instructions, because of Abraham's need or stimulus (*sabab*).

A majority of the reports concerning Abraham's question revolves around his contemplation of the processes of nature; this situation brought the question to his mind. Qatada said... Abraham came upon a dead animal which the sea and land creatures were distributing among themselves. So he said: 'Lord, show me how you bring life to the dead.' Al-Hasan, 'Ata' al-Khurasani, al-Dahhak and Ibn Juraij said that it was a corpse of a donkey on the shore of the sea; 'Ata' said: the lake of Tiberias (i.e., the Sea of Galilee). They all said: (Abraham) saw it, the land and sea creatures devouring it. When the tide came in, the fish and the sea animals came and ate from it; what fell off it became a part of the water. When the tide went out, the beasts of prey came and ate it; what fell off it became a part of the land. When the beasts of prey left, the birds came and ate from it; what was dropped became part of the wind. When he saw that, Abraham was amazed at it and he said: 'Oh Lord, You know that it amazes us. Show me how You will bring life to it so I may see it with my own eyes.' [17]

Abraham's amazement leads him to question God, and God's response to him is as indicated in the Qur'anic verse. Another version of the same basic report has Satan put the evil question into Abraham's mind after witnessing the same events: 'How can God gather together all these parts from all these bellies?' This question apparently troubled Abraham's heart, so he asked God. [18]

The second major theme relates to Abraham's adventures with Nimrod; the account in al-Wahidi, credited to Ibn Ishaq, is also found in similar form in al-Kisa'i's *Qisas al-anbiya*.



When Abraham argued with Nimrod he said: ‘(It is) my Lord who gives life and brings death.’ (Q. 2:258) So Nimrod said: ‘I give life and bring death.’ (Q. 2:258) He then killed a man and set a man free and said: ‘I brought death to the former and gave life to the latter.’ Abraham said to him: ‘God gives life by restoring the soul to a dead body.’ So Nimrod said to him: ‘Have you witnessed that of which you speak?’ He was not able to reply, ‘Yes, I have seen it,’ so he turned to a different proof. Then he asked his Lord to show him giving life to the dead in order to settle his heart about the argument. So he (Abraham) informed him (Nimrod) of the witnessing and viewing (of the act of God).[19]

The reference in this story to the ‘different proof’ may well be Abraham’s demand of Nimrod to make the sun rise from the west if he is so powerful (i.e., Q. 2:258); this is an intermediate argument for the power of God which, according to this *sabab*, interrupts the flow of the overall argument between Nimrod and Abraham over life and death. The special quality of this *sabab* is its ability to continue the context of the Nimrod encounter from verse 258 onwards; while the first *sabab* develops in a minor way the theme of the donkey which God ‘clothes with flesh’ in verse 259, the overall Nimrod context is lost in that version. The Nimrod *sabab* is clearly an effort at continual haggadic narrative.

A third option also disregards the context of the passage but tries to explain Abraham’s question:

When God took Abraham as a friend, the messenger of death asked permission of his Lord to go to Abraham and tell him the good news of that. So he went and said: ‘I come to you bringing you good news that God has taken you as a friend.’ So he praised God and said: ‘What is the sign of that?’ He said: ‘That God will answer your call and give life to the dead at your request.’ Then he proceeded on his way and left. So Abraham said: ‘Lord, show me how you gave life to the dead.’ He said: ‘Do you not believe?’ He said: ‘Why yes, but in order to set my heart at ease by knowledge that you answer when I call and give me what I ask for and that you have taken me as a friend.’[20]

This *sabab*, rather cleverly, turns the focus to God: that it was God who put the whole matter to Abraham to begin with. This *sabab* illustrates clearly what is implicit in all the other



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accounts as well: that Abraham could not possibly have had any doubts in his faith and that the reason for his question was totally innocent. Theological motivation colours the *asbab* material in this, as in other instances, but the main concern is for a good story and, in some cases, the narrative context.

The notion of *ta'yin al-mubham*, identification of the unknown, is, of course, closely related to narrative expansion as well, and is most obviously seen in examples where identification is made of the Qur'anic 'they' which is so frequently left ambiguous in the text, as in, for example, Q. 2:116: 'They say: "God has taken a son; glory be to him!" Rather, to Him is what is in the heavens and the earth, each obeying Him.'

Al-Wahidi and Berlin 3578 each provide reports for this verse which function to explicate who the 'they' of 'they say' are: 'It was revealed concerning the Jews when they said 'Uzair is the son of God and concerning the Christians of Najran when they said the Messiah is the son of God and concerning the polytheists among the Arabs who said the angels are the daughters of God.'[21] As Blachère has stated, the 'horror of the uncertain' is the prime motivation in haggadic exegesis,[22] and the *sabab* seems to be a particularly favoured and appropriate literary form in which to incorporate such information and thereby quiet restless minds.

It is this kind of interpretation of the motivation behind the citation of the *sabab* which would also seem to explain best the resolution of metaphorical language by means of the *sabab*, which is displayed most clearly in Q. 2:19-20: 'Or (it is) like rain from the sky in which is darkness and thunder and lightning. They put their fingers in their ears because of the thunder-claps as protection from death. But God encircles the unbelievers. The lightning almost takes away their sight; whenever it gives them light, they walk in it. But when it darkens on them, they stand still. If God wished He would take away their hearing and their sight. Indeed God has power over everything.'

Al-Suyuti is alone among *asbab* authors in bringing forth a *sabab* for this verse, and a very extensive one at that; the report is derived from al-Tabari's *Tafsir*. Two men of the Medinan hypocrites were fleeing from the prophet to the polytheists when this rain [*matar*] which God mentioned befell them, and in it was loud thunder and thunder-claps and lightning. Every time



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the thunder-claps befell them, it made both of them put their fingers in their ears out of fear [*faraq*] that the thunder-clap would enter their ears [*masami*] and kill them [*taqtuluhuma*]. When the lightning flashed they walked in its light and when it did not they stood in their place, not walking. They began saying: ‘If only we had begun by going to Muhammad and putting our hands in his [i.e., converting].’ So they arose and went out and converted to Islam, putting their hands in his. Their conversion was good. So God made the affair of these two fleeing hypocrites into an extended simile [*mathal*] applicable to the hypocrites of Medina.

From here the report goes on to explain the application of this story as a simile:

When the hypocrites were present at the assembly of the prophet, they put their fingers in their ears out of fear of the speech of the prophet concerning something that was revealed about them or they were reminded of something; so they were killed. (That is) just like those two fleeing hypocrites who put their fingers in their ears. And (the Qur’anic statement) ‘Whenever it gives them light, they walk in it,’ when their property and children increase and they gain booty or win battles. They walk in it and they say: ‘Indeed Muhammad's religion is true for this time’ and they stick to it, just as those two hypocrites walked when the lightning gave them light. And (the Qur’anic statement) ‘But when it darkens, they stand still,’ when their property and children are destroyed and misfortune befalls them, they say: ‘This is because of the religion of Muhammad’ and they fall back into their disbelief, just as those two hypocrites stood when the lightning darkened for them.[23]

Now this *sabab* accomplishes a number of things, very prominently the function of incorporating glosses. But probably most significantly, the *sabab* acts to concretise the simile in human events. As the second half of al-Suyuti’s report explains, the verse is normally taken as a simile, the second one in a row after the explicit mention of *mathal* in verse 17, with the resolution of the vocabulary being rain = the Qur’an, darkness = the disbelievers and so forth.

But the *sabab* provides an intermediary stage in the interpretation of the terms of the simile. In fact, the *sabab* would seem to suggest that an exemplum may be extracted directly from the wording of the text rather than being taken on a symbolic level. The underlying desire is to read the text as literally as possible. This *sabab* then would seem to be grounded in the basic



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haggadic notion of removing any ambiguity and at the same time of generating a story for repetition and (edifying) entertainment.

Creating a story not only satisfies a haggadic impulse (along with providing opportunities for lexical and masoretic elaboration) but also performs a basic exegetical function of providing an authoritative interpretational context and determining the limits of each narrative pericope. It has often been remarked that the Qur'an lacks an overall cohesive structure (albeit that in that very fact may well lie the text's special literary power) and does not provide within itself many keys for interpretation. One of the very basic problems is that it is often impossible to tell where one theme or pericope ends and the next one begins. This has been noted above with regards to Q. 2:260 but it is most clearly indicated in the exegetical flurries in the form of *asbab* reports that alight around Q. 2:113-121. The questions posed by the exegetes are: is this one section? Does the one section have the same referent (be it Jews, Christians or pagans)? Those who wish to make legal deductions from Q. 2:115 are forced to break up the section and see the referent of the passage as varying; others, from the opposing camp, attempt to maintain one narrative context throughout and downplay any legal implications (or see such as an additional 'level' in the reading).

The *sabab* plays a central role in supporting exegetical decisions regarding the establishment of context; note, however, the *asbab* information is frequently far too varied and flexible to allow decisions to be based primarily upon it - rather, the exegete clearly makes the decision on the interpretation and supports it ex post facto with the appropriate *sabab*. What does occur, however, is that narratives are adduced, for example, concerning Jewish-Christian disputation in front of Prophet Muhammad, and each verse from Q. 2:113 through 121 is seen as a response to this disputation by means of the *sabab*.

The reverse situation to this establishing of a context may occur, where a *sabab* is cited in order to defeat the seeming context. An example occurs in Q. 2:280: 'If he [the debtor] is in difficulty, then (grant him) a delay until (it is) easy (for him). If you give charity, (it is) better for you, if only you knew.'



Only one *sabab* is found for this verse; the report continues the saga of Banu ‘Amr and Banu’l-Mughira as related in the *asbab* material for verse 278.[24] It is Muqatil who makes the matter clear: [25] verses 278 and 279 are the response which Prophet Muhammad sent to ‘Attab concerning the situation of the usury. As a result, the following *sabab* arises for verse 280. ‘Banu ‘Amr ibn ‘Umair said to Banu’l-Mughira: “Give us the principal and we will give you the interest.” Banu’l-Mughira said: “We are in difficulty today; let us delay until the dates ripen.” They refused to postpone (it) for them. So God revealed... [2: 280]’[26]

So Banu ‘Amr, it would seem, agreed to forget the interest (in response to verse 278) but still wanted their principal (*ru’us amwalihim*) which now Banu’l-Mughira decided they could not repay.

Implicit in this *sabab*, and that would seem to be the point, is that the verse refers not to the repayment of usury-which after all, would appear to have been the topic of the pericope-but rather, to the repayment of all debts. The contrary view was argued by some; several reports are found in al-Tabari to the effect that the verse was revealed specifically about usury [27]. But, as al-Nahhas points out, [28] that makes little sense since usury has already been forbidden; a gloss in al-Tabari of ‘until (it is) easy’ as ‘death’ is probably an attempt at maintaining the usury interpretation while recognising the illegality of the situation to begin with [29].

An extension of this haggadic notion in the role of the *sabab* is to be detected in a seeming halakhic context as well, that of providing the Jahili background to verses of apparent legal intent. Such *asbab* reports do not, in general, at least, function to provide a context from which legal deductions can be made; rather they answer the naturally curious (haggadic) question of why does the Qur’an say to do (or not to do) such-and-such a thing? Why would anyone have done it (e.g., enter their houses from the rear as in Q. 2:189b) anyway? Numerous examples of this occur, as for example in the just cited Q. 2:189b: ‘It is not piety to enter houses from their rear. But piety is the fear of God and entering houses by their doors. Fear God, perhaps you will prosper.’



There is a total agreement among the exegetes, in one sense at least, that this verse was revealed about people who did not enter their houses through the door but rather through the rear when they were in the state of *ihram*. Several of the *asbab* reports state precisely no more than that and then imply that this verse was revealed in order to remove any sanction for the necessity of such a practice [30].

A larger series of *asbab* reports concerned with this verse, however, is found concerning the practices of the pre-Islamic group, the Hums. It has been pointed out especially by Wansbrough [31] that the type of information found concerning the Hums (and other similar pre-Islamic groups) is totally exegetical: what has been ‘preserved’ is only what is relevant to understanding the Qur’an and *hadith*. This is certainly true for any details concerning the Hums and entering houses in *ihram*, and it is a notion which is only emphasised by the discovery that, in fact, contradictory information is preserved concerning the Hums and this activity: they either did or did not enter their houses from the rear, depending on the report.

A typical narrative is the following from al-Suyuti: ‘The Quraysh were called the Hums and they used to enter their houses in *ihram* while the Ansar and the rest of the Arabs did not enter by the door in *ihram*. While Prophet Muhammad was in a garden, he went out of the door and Qutba ibn ‘Amir al-Ansari went out with him. They said: “Oh prophet, Qutba is an immoral man; he has gone out of the door with you.” (The Prophet) said to him: “What prompted you to do this?” He said: “I saw you doing it, so I did as you did.” (The Prophet) said: “I am of the Hums,” to which he responded: “My religion is your religion” So God revealed... [2: 189b]’[32]

But precisely the opposite point is made in some sources; one such report is found in al-‘Iraqi, al-Tabari and, most explicitly, al-Azraqi (d. about 220 AH / 835 CE) as found in Guillaume’s translation of the *Sira*: ‘If one of (the Hums) before and at the beginning of Islam was in *ihram* and was one of the house dwellers, i.e., living in houses or villages, he would dig a hole at the back of his house and go in and out by it and not enter by the door... The year of Hudaibiya the Prophet entered his house. One of the Ansar was with him and he stopped at the door, explaining that he was one of the Hums. Prophet Muhammad said: “I am one of the Hums



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too. My religion and your religion are the same,” so the Ansari went into the house by the door as he saw the prophet do.’[33]

Exegetically, whether the Hums did or did not enter the doors matters very little of course; the point of the *sabab* is clearly to answer that perpetual question of why: why does the Qur’an mention such a thing as how to enter one’s house, a notion probably quite foreign to those involved in the development of the exegetical tradition? The *sabab*, once again, responds to the basic haggadic impulse. This adducing of the Jahili ‘foil’ or background is, in my estimation, one of the most significant elements of the *asbab* reports. Provided in these reports, is an implicit evaluation of the Islamic dispensation; it is saying: ‘this is how things were before Islam but now Islam has arrived and things have improved substantially.’ It is to be noted that it is through the complementary notion of the Abrahamic legacy of Islam that this hermeneutical device is able to function almost perfectly. What is carried over from the pagan age is then to be contrasted either positively (in the case of the Abrahamic legacy) or negatively (in the case of the Jahili foil) with the provisions of the Islamic dispensation.

There is implicit in this adducing of the Jahili foil another at least potential function; this is made most explicit, as it happens, by Maimonides in his treatment of the Jewish law. One reason which Maimonides brings forth to provide an explanation of the legal regulations in Judaism (over and above their rational worth) is that they serve to protect the Jews from foreign (i.e., pagan) influence and thereby produce a positive group identity; ‘You will know from texts of the *Torah* figuring in a number of passages that the first intention of the Law as a whole is to put an end to idolatry, to wipe out its traces and all that is bound up with it, even its memory as well as all that leads to any of its works-as, for instance, *familiar spirits*, or as a *wizard*...’[34]

Only by detailing pagan practice can the accomplishment and the protection implicit in Jewish law be rationally perceived. ‘As for the prohibition against eating *meat [boiled] in milk*, it is in my opinion not improbable that in addition to this being undoubtedly very gross food and very filling – *idolatry* had something to do with it. Perhaps such food was eaten at one of the



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ceremonies of their cult or at one of their festivals. According to me this is the most probable view regarding the reason for this prohibition.’[35]

Maimonides, of course, faced problems when he had to deal with an obvious continuation of pagan practice in Judaism, most especially with sacrifice; his only rationale was that sacrifice as a religious rite was too popular to be immediately abolished although eventually it too would be declared a part of the pagan heritage (as indeed it became with the destruction of the Temple).

Maimonides did not have available to him the exegetical tool with which Muslims were able to approach their legal structure, that of the Islamic-Abrahamic heritage that could be postulated for a continued pagan practice under the new dispensation. Muslims did then face the problem of determining exactly what was Abrahamic and what was not, however, and this problem is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the various traces of totally opposing opinions which are recorded in the *asbab* information, as, for example, in Q. 2:158.[36] Still, the basic point remains that the production of a Jahili background provides a measure by which Islam is evaluated and provides evidence of the protection and of the sense of identity which Islam entails.

Within this notion of the Jahili background it is to be observed quite frequently that there is a flexibility in the identity of the Jahili opponents; both Jews and pagans may perform the function, for example, as in Q. 2:26. This would seem to indicate a mixing of apologetic (i.e., as implied in the ‘evolution’ of Islam away from paganism in the Jahiliyya) and polemical (i.e., *tahrif* on the part of the Jews in haggadic-narrative expansion) concerns and in no way can this really be seen to affect the understanding of the basic purpose of such exegesis. Q. 2:26 states: ‘Indeed God is not ashamed to form a simile from the gnat or something higher. Those who believe, they know that it is the truth from their Lord; but those who disbelieve say: ‘What does God mean by this parable?’

A number of *asbab* reports are found for this verse in al-Suyuti, al-Wahidi and Berlin 3578, all of which basically tell the same story: extended similes included in the Qur’an were ridiculed by Prophet Muhammad’s opponents and this verse was revealed as a rebuttal. There is,



however, debate over exactly which parables were being ridiculed and exactly who the ridiculing opponents were.

Two choices are presented for which similes are intended; the first makes reference to the two examples previously cited in the *sura*: the man who kindled the fire in 2:17 and the rain from the sky in 2:19. This solution pays attention to the context and canonical order of the scripture.[37] The alternate choice seems more concerned to do justice to the Qur'anic phrase *ma ba'uda fa ma fauqaha*, 'from the gnat or something higher'; cited are the extended similes of the *dhubab* 'fly', in Q. 22:73 and the '*ankabut* 'spider', in Q. 29:41.[38] *Ba'uda* is frequently glossed by exegetes as simply something weak or small;[39] *dhubab* as 'fly' certainly fits that category, just as '*ankabut*, spider, fits *fauqaha*, the fly being the favourite food of the spider. The intention of this choice of similes seems exegetical.

The question of which opponents of Prophet Muhammad ridiculed him about these extended similes is, it seems, related to the choice of similes as well. One possible opponent group was the Jews and they are always pictured as ridiculing the fly and spider similes by laughing and saying that such talk 'does not resemble the speech of God' or asking rhetorically, 'Is this supposed to resemble the speech of God?', a gloss of the Qur'anic 'What does God mean by this simile?' The dispute is plainly polemical, over the respective merits of Jewish and Muslim revelation, and does not touch on the meaning of the simile.[40]

The other group of opponents to Prophet Muhammad, the polytheists, makes exactly the same accusation against the Qur'an and these extended similes in other versions of the *sabab*; this once again demonstrates the interchangeability of these two groups in the accounts of the life of Muhammad.[41] That considerations of Qur'anic context play a role in selecting the examples of similes as being 2:17 and 2:19 is confirmed by the fact that it is always the 'hypocrites' who are pictured as confronting Prophet Muhammad about these specific similes and verses. 'God is above making such similes,' the hypocrites are given to say.[42] This would seem to go back to an understanding that verses 7 to 21 of *sura* 2 were revealed specifically about the hypocrites.



Reading scripture in its canonical order and giving consideration to the connection between various pericopes - that is, paying attention to the context - provides the exegetical impulse for the citation of such *asbab* reports. It is to be noted that al-Tabari, and following him al-Suyuti, argues precisely this point, thus giving support to this version of the *sabab*. [43] As well, al-Suyuti considers the mention of the polytheists inappropriate in connection with this verse 'because it is Medinan' [44] the introduction of the Jews into al-Wahidi's text he seems to consider a textual error, for he modifies the report which he cites from al-Wahidi to make it read 'polytheists' and seems to be able conveniently to ignore the multiplicity of reports in other works which leave little doubt that al-Wahidi did intend to cite the Jews in the passage.[45]

Now all the above cited functions of the *sabab* are interrelated in their basic haggadic nature and indeed this, I would argue, seems to be the predominant aspect in all *asbab* reports. It would, however, be totally incorrect to gloss over the situations where quite clearly the *asbab* do have halakhic value as argued by Wansbrough and by Muslim scholars although, even there, whether the chronological aspect is primary in the material here studied, as has been the general assumption, would seem to be quite doubtful.

Halakhic *asbab* material can function in a number of ways. Frequently a *sabab* will provide an appropriate context in which a halakhic meaning may be extracted from the verse: this happens most prominently in Q. 2:115 where the incredible multiplicity of material illustrates the point well that the legal meaning to be taken from the verse can be created or destroyed by the *asbab* material. Q. 2:115 reads: 'To God belong the east and the west; wherever you turn, the face of God is there. Indeed, God is omnipresent, all-knowing.'

One thing unites all the *asbab* reports adduced for this verse; virtually all of the material is constructed such that the verse is not to be included as a part of the *qibla* controversy. Approximately ten different major themes are found in the *asbab* material, each of which suggests a totally different intention behind the verse. Some leave the verse halakhically relevant only in a partial way; this is found in a report which suggests this verse is a continuation of Q. 2:114 which concerns the destruction of mosques and thus that this verse,



115, intends that the destruction of mosques does not mean that one can no longer face a *qibla*.^[46] Here, narrative context is the important factor, as suggested previously.

Another series of reports concerns the Najashi, named Ashama or Adhama ibn Abhar and Prophet Muhammad's call for a prayer for him. The simplest report is found always attributed to Qatada: 'The prophet said: "Indeed our brother the Najashi has died, so pray for him!" They said: "Should we pray for a man who was not a Muslim?!" So, "Among the people of the book are some who believe in God and what has been revealed to you and what has been revealed to them, humbling themselves to God" [Q. 3:199] was revealed. So they said: "But he did not pray toward the *qibla*." So God revealed... [2:115].'^[47]

A variant on this, found only in al-Wahidi and Berlin 3578^[48] and attributed to 'Ata', adds the idea of Gabriel communicating the death to Prophet Muhammad, removes the revelation of 3:199 and makes explicit that the Najashi had prayed always to Jerusalem and had not been informed of the change of *qibla* to the Ka'ba.^[49]

Significant in these reports is the use of *qibla* as a sectarian emblem. The Najashi is not a Muslim, the claim is, purely because he did not pray to the correct *qibla*. The overall impact of this report could perhaps be best classified as haggadic elaboration of a polemical motif.

But most important without a doubt are two series of reports which give the verse a definite legal content, but, interestingly enough, make two radically different legal points, each justified by its own *asbab* material. One series of reports is structured with the following elements: (1) travelling either with or without the Prophet; (2) the travellers stop at the time for prayer; (3) it is cloudy, dark or foggy and the *qibla* cannot be determined; (4) everyone prays towards the direction he thinks best; (5) next morning the error becomes clear; (6) the Prophet is asked about it, the verse is revealed.^[50]

The elaborations evidenced in these reports elucidate the halakhic point of the anecdote: that prayer was legally valid, if, out of ignorance, the *qibla* was not faced. This was the generally accepted ruling among the *madhahib*, according to al-Qurtubi, the exceptions being al-Shafi'i and al-Mughira who considered the *qibla* a *shart*, i.e., a part of the obligation of



prayer.[51] Thus this *sabab* is halakhically relevant and, by establishing the appropriate context for interpretation, it serves to pose the halakhic problem for which the answer is given by scripture; that is, the problem of an undeterminable *qibla* is posed and, through the interpretational means of a *sabab*, a passage of the Qur'an is seen to be relevant.

This being the case, one can only express a certain amount of surprise at finding an alternate series of *asbab* for the verse with its own halakhic point to make, the legal implications of which are generally accepted in combination with those of the previous *sabab*. The basic *sabab* is terse but manages to pose the problem of what to do if one is riding a camel at prayer-time; is it necessary to dismount or may one ride and pray in the direction the camel is facing?

Variant reports are found but the following from *al-Sahih* of Muslim[52] are typical:

- (a) from Ibn 'Umar: 'Prophet Muhammad used to pray the *witr* prayer on his camel.'
- (b) from Sa'id ibn Yasar: 'I was travelling with Ibn 'Umar on the road to Mecca. When I feared morning (was approaching), I dismounted and prayed the *witr* prayer and then caught up with him. Ibn 'Umar said to me: "Where have you been?" I said to him: "I feared dawn (was approaching) so I dismounted and prayed the *witr* prayer." So 'Abd Allah (ibn 'Umar) said: "Is there not in the Prophet an example [*uswa*] for you?" I said: "Indeed, there is by God!" He said: "Indeed, the Prophet prayed the *witr* prayer on his camel." '
- (c) from Salim ibn 'Abd Allah: 'The Prophet used to pray supererogatory prayers on his camel toward whichever direction it faced and he prayed the *witr* prayer on it, although he did not pray the prescribed prayers on it.'
- (d) from Ibn 'Umar: 'The Prophet used to pray while going from Mecca to Medina on his camel in whatever direction it pointed. He said "Concerning this was revealed..." [Q. 2:115].'

The *sabab* is used to support the notion that supererogatory prayers may be said while riding, regardless of the direction faced.[53] Al-Qurtubi also uses the verse as an occasion to deal with an analogous situation of those who are sick and being carried.[54] Al-Tabari also considers this verse as related to the 'prayer of fear', normally attached to Q. 2:239 and 4:101-4.[55]



A second way in which the *asbab* material functions to produce halakhic relevance for the verse is by providing an example of the application of a law as found within the Qur'an; an example here is Q. 2:232: 'When you divorce the women and they reach their term, do not prevent them from marrying their husbands if they come to terms between themselves honourably. That is the preaching to those among you who believe in God and the last day. That is cleaner and purer for you. God knows and you do not know.'

The *asbab* material for this verse divides between specification of two people who tried to prevent the marriage of a woman under their care. The most popular identification is presented in three different versions by al-Wahidi as well as being cited by al-Suyuti and Berlin 3578. 'Ma'qil ibn Yasar narrated: I had given my sister in marriage to a man. He divorced her. When her waiting period was over, he came to propose to her. I said to him: "I let you marry, I supported you and honoured you, then you divorced her. Now you come to propose to her. No, by God, you may never return!" He narrated: The man had no objection and the woman wished to return to him. So God revealed this verse. I then said: "Now I will do it, oh Prophet!" So I married her to him.' [56]

A clearly less popular although fairly widely circulated report is the following: 'Jabir ibn 'Abd Allah al-Ansari had care of the daughter of his uncle, whose spouse divorced her. She completed her waiting period, then he returned wanting her to return to him. Jabir refused. He said: "You divorced a daughter of our uncle; now you wish to marry her again?" The woman wanted her spouse (again) because she was pleased with him. So this verse was revealed.' [57]

Once again, these reports provide the background information of the fact that an act contrary to the Qur'anic regulation took place but the Qur'an then corrected the situation. The *sabab* also includes a gloss of the Qur'anic '*adala* as *mana'a*, 'to prevent.' But the importance of the reports is much greater than that, and it would seem that they have been tailored to their purpose. Both al-Qurtubi [58] and Ibn al-'Arabi [59] cite the *sabab* of Ma'qil in order to support their position that marriage is not permitted without a guardian to give permission.



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As al-Qurtubi states: ‘Marriage is not permitted without a guardian because the sister of Ma‘qil was a divorcee and if she had been able to marry by herself, then there would have been no need for Ma‘qil.’[60] Quite explicitly, the *sabab* establishes the truth of this position for al-Qurtubi. It would thus seem significant that in both versions of the *sabab* a reference is made to the fact that the woman in question wanted to re-marry but could not because of the lack of permission. Such a reference, unnatural to the narrative flow of both reports, is undoubtedly a reference made in the story so that the specific halakhic point can be made.

As is acknowledged by al-Qurtubi, the followers of the legal school of Abu Hanifa do not agree with this ruling; basing themselves on Q. 2:230, ‘If he divorces her, she is not permitted to him after that, until she marries a different spouse and he divorces her’, in which there is no mention of a guardian, they reject the entire notion. Al-Jassas,[61] being a Hanafite, represents this position. Towards the end of his multi-page argument he mentions the *sabab* of Ma‘qil, in two versions, and rejects it on the grounds of its *isnad*. [62] *Isnad* criticism is obviously a tool which can be employed when needed and disregarded when not. The fact that the report is found in al-Bukhari makes no difference to al-Jassas who is quite apparently in the position of having to reject the *sabab*.

A *sabab* may also act to deflect exegetically an apparent halakhic content of a verse such as in Q. 2:79: ‘Woe to those who write the book with their own hands and then say: “This is from God” in order to sell it at a small price. Woe to them for what their hands write and woe to them for what they gain.’

Various *asbab* reports are found for this verse, virtually all of which centre on the notion of the malicious alteration of Jewish scripture. Al-Wahidi provides the most extensive report: ‘(The Jews) changed the description of the Prophet in their book and made him a man with long hair and of medium brown (colouring). They said to their companions and followers: “Look at the description of the prophet who is to appear at the end of time; it does not resemble the description of this (man).” The Rabbis and the learned ones used to receive provisions from the rest of the Jews and they feared that they would not receive it if they revealed the (true) description; therefore they changed it.’[63]



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While similar reports of scriptural falsification are found in al-Suyuti and Berlin 3578 and while the latter adds that the Jews did this out of ‘distaste’ and ‘envy’ (of the Arabs being chosen to receive the final prophet), al-Wahidi’s report is unique in that it combines a gloss on the monetary aspect of the Qur’anic verse with the standard *tahrif* charge; that is, the Jewish leaders ‘sold’, figuratively at least, the description of Prophet Muhammad for a small price, their free food-supply.

Notable within various reports given by al-Tabari are some traditions which suggest that what is involved in this verse is not *tahrif*, alteration, of the *Torah* but rather the writing of entire books and claiming that they are from God (Mishna? Talmud? variations on that polemical theme have certainly been common within the Christian world) which would suggest that the polemic over scripture between Jews and Muslims may have gone further than the charge of alteration and faulty transmission.[64]

An isolated report also in al-Tabari pictures the Gentiles (*ummiyyun*) as upset because they had no prophet nor a book, so they wrote a scripture themselves and proceeded to tell a group of ‘lowly ignoramuses’ that the book was from God, in order to be able to sell it to them.[65]

Finally, al-Tabari (followed by al-Qurtubi) has his perpetually impertinent questioner ask: ‘What is the meaning of “Woe to those who write the book with their own hands?” How can one write without the hand?’[66]

One should not overlook the distinct possibility that al-Tabari was endowed with a certain sense of humour, but the point does lead him to a discussion of the difference between author and writer and to state that the verse most certainly intends a stricture upon the Jews and that it does not necessarily imply a restriction upon writing, buying or selling books. Indeed, the *sabab* in this case serves to remove possible ‘misinterpretation’ with serious legal implications.

On the other hand, *asbab* reports which seem to have halakhic content are on occasion apparently not employed in exegesis in that way, for example in Q. 2:230: ‘If he divorces her, she is not permitted to him after then until she marries a different spouse and he divorces her.



There is no sin on the two of them if they return, if they think that they can maintain the rules of God. These are the rules of God (which) he explains to a people who understands.’

Al-Suyuti and al-‘Iraqi stand alone among the *asbab* books and almost all the exegetical works consulted in citing a *sabab* for this verse. ‘(The verse) was revealed about ‘A’isha bint ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Atik, who was living with Rifa‘a ibn Wahb ibn ‘Atik (he was the son of her uncle). He divorced her with the final divorce and she married ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn al-Zubair al-Qurazi after him. He then divorced her. She then went to Prophet Muhammad and said: ‘‘He divorced me before having slept with me. May I return to (my) first (husband)?’’ So... [Q. 2: 230]... was revealed. So he slept with her and divorced her after that; thus there was no sin on the two of them when they rejoined.’[67]

The same identification of the protagonists is made in al-Kalbi and al-Tabari,[68] and a shortened version of the report is found in Muqatil,[69] although the report is absent from explicit mention in the *ahkam* texts, despite its halakhic relevance. Much debate is conducted in the *ahkam* works concerning whether intercourse is necessary to confirm the legal status of the intervening marriage, the precise point with which this *sabab* is concerned;[70] the appeal to *ijma*‘ is made by al-Tabari[71] in order to prove the need for intercourse to legalise the marriage. It would seem that a *sabab* may well be halakhic in application or even in origin, but that fact does not necessarily mean that it will actually be advanced for such purposes.

It is within discussions of *naskh* that one intuitively expects to find the majority of the discussions about chronology and one also expects that such discussions will centre around *asbab* reports; indeed, this was an emphasised point within most previous scholarly discourses on *asbab*. In very few cases, however, is that discussion about chronology and *asbab* ever carried on in the verses that were examined in this study, at least on an overt level. An example of where it does happen to some extent at least occurs in Q. 2:104: ‘O you who believe! Do not say *ra‘ina*! For those who disbelieve, there will be a great punishment.’

The numerous *asbab* reports which are connected to this verse all attempt to answer the many questions that arise about this prohibition: Why should it not be said? Why was it said in any case? The prohibition contained in the verse was seen, quite obviously, as applying to Muslims,



so it must have been Muslims who were saying the word at one time; this assumption is reflected in all the reports. Just where, why and how the Muslims used this word is a matter of some debate, with three original contexts being suggested by the *asbab* reports:

(a) the word was Jewish-perhaps used mockingly-which the Muslims misunderstood and adopted into their speech. Al-Suyuti presents the following report in this vein: ‘When two Jewish men, Malik ibn al-Saif and Rifa’ ibn Zaid, met and talked to Prophet Muhammad they would say: *ra’ina sam’aka wa-sma’ ghair musma’* [compare Q. 4:46]. The Muslims thought that this was something that the people of the book (said) to honour their prophets. So they said that to the Prophet. So God revealed... [2: 104].’[72]

Just why it was necessary for the word to be banned is not made clear in this report; another report of al-Suyuti suggests simply that God ‘detested’ the phrase.[73] Al-Tabari’s reports, however, state that the Jews said it ‘to mock’ Muhammad and thus it was banned;[74] the Muslims apparently did not realise that this was mockery, an observation which leads al-Tabari to reject the reports since the *ashab* would not have been so careless or foolish as such an oversight would suggest.[75]

(b) the word, in the ‘Jewish language’ was a curse, although it was an innocent word in Arabic. Al-Wahidi, among others, gives an extensive account of this matter: ‘The Arabs used to say (*ra’ina*) and when the Jews heard (the Muslims) saying it to the Prophet they were amazed at that. *Ra’ina* was a severe curse in their language. They said: “We used to curse Muhammad secretly but now they know the curse of Muhammad because it is (also) in their speech.” They used to come to the Prophet and say: “Oh Muhammad, *ra’ina*,” and then they would laugh. One of the *ansar*, Sa’d ibn ‘Ubada who knew the Jewish language, noticed it and said: “Oh enemies of God! May God’s curse be on you! By Him who has the soul of Muhammad in His hand, if I hear it from anyone of you, I will break his neck!” They said: “Have you not said it to him (yourself)?!” So God revealed... [2: 104].’[76] The notion of an inter-lingual play, perhaps, ‘see’ and ‘evil’, is seen to be the reason for the prohibition.

(c) the word was a part of Arab-Jahili speech. Al-Suyuti, among others, has the simple report that the Arabs used to say this word in the Jahiliyya and that God then prohibited its use.[77]



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No further explanation is given; the report is one more of the numerous instances of the flexibility of the motif of opposition to Prophet Muhammad.

All these *asbab* reports fulfil a basic haggadic function of providing answers for matters left unstated in the Qur'an. But the importance of the verse goes somewhat beyond the haggadic level; for one thing, the verse is considered to be a case of abrogation by al-Nahhas, on the basis of the *sabab*.^[78] The *sabab* implies for al-Nahhas that at one time it was permitted (*mubah*) to say the word, then that permission was removed or abrogated.

This seems significant because many other laws with the Qur'an are not considered by al-Nahhas as abrogators (food laws for example); rather the assumption seems to be these rulings confirm past practice; but here, on the basis of the *sabab*, prior usage is established and thus the verse enters the realm of *naskh*.

Even more important here is the halakhic significance of the *sabab*. Al-Jassas sees the legal significance of the verse as going beyond merely not saying *ra'ina*; the Jews (or the Arabs) said the word to mock others, according to *sabab* - therefore mockery is not permitted; nor are double-entendres permitted (or at least, maliciously intended ones).^[79] The wording of the verse is extended in legal application through application of the *sabab*.

While it cannot really be doubted that there is an implicit assumption of the chronological-progressive order of the Qur'an in the *naskh* texts, it is notable that the discussions themselves do not generally make this point explicit; *naskh*, be it with regards to wine or direction of prayer, always assumes that the present law is known (that is, no wine and facing Mecca), and the verses which agree with that fact are necessarily the valid ones. Any verses which contradict this are necessarily invalid, and thus can be logically arranged according to a basic notion of 'progressive revelation.' The arguments found in the *naskh* texts are, in short, based on logic not chronology.

Where that logic needs backing up in terms of specifics, appeal is generally made to the ordering of *suras* and, once again, not *asbab* information. Of course, the two notions of ordering *suras* and the *asbab* interact through the adducing of the *sabab* regarding



the *qiyasi* method of *sura* ordering at Q. 2:21.[80] Even there, however, the connection is deflected by al-Wahidi at least who suggests that this *sabab* refers to the people who are addressed (that is, the Meccans or the Medinans) and not the place (and therefore the time!) of revelation.[81] To emphasise the point once more: the bringing forth of the *asbab* as explicit proof of ‘progressive revelation’ within these texts is simply not done very frequently.[82]

A matter which appears not to have arisen in the examination of *sura* 2 is the explicit question of prophecy; is prophecy in the Qur’an not closely interrelated with chronology and therefore, one may assume, *asbab*? In the polemical text of Ibn Kammuna, a list of ten verses from the Qur’an which are traditionally claimed to be prophecies is adduced; cited in it is Q. 2:61, which states in reference to the Jews, ‘Struck upon them was humiliation and poverty’, about which the argument runs: ‘[the truth of] this became clear from the fact that after this word no forceful power appeared among the Jews.’[83] Now the precise ‘prophetic’ sense of this passage is admittedly vague, but it is worthy of note that no *sabab* is found in the *asbab* texts to support the necessary chronology and interpretation of the assertion. Once again, as far as the verse-prophecy is concerned, the fact is known and not in need of proof. In addition, two instances may be noted in *sura* 2 (Q. 2:142, 189a) where the *sabab* appears to deflect exegetically possible prophetic qualities in the verses concerned.[84]

In conclusion, then, in comparison to Wansbrough’s statements, the following may be asserted:

- (a) the primary (i.e., predominant) function of the *sabab* in the exegetical texts is not halakhic.
- (b) the essential role of the material is found in haggadic exegesis; that is, the *sabab* functions to provide an interpretation of a verse within a basic narrative framework. I would tentatively trace the origins of this material to the context of the *qussas*, the wandering story-tellers and pious preachers, and to a basically popular religious worship situation where such stories would prove both enjoyable and edifying.[85]



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[1]See Rippin, ‘al-Zarkashi’, 248-58.

[2]See Wansbrough, *Qur’anic Studies*, 141-2, 177-85.

[3]The text in question here is *Tanwir al-miqbas min tafsir Ibn ‘Abbas* referred to by Wansbrough as the *tafsir* of the al-Kalbi and catalogued in that way in GAL (Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur) and GAS (Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums); for further details and the argument that the text originated in the third or fourth century, see Rippin, ‘al-Zuhri’, 23-24.

[4]On all of these *asbab* texts, see Rippin, ‘Exegetical genre’, 4-7, 9-10.

[5]See Rippin, ‘Exegetical genre’, 12-15.

[6]See Rippin, ‘al-Zarkashi’, 250.

[7]See Rippin, ‘Exegetical genre’, 12-13.

[8]Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 22, report from al-Kalbi, also *Wajiz*, 12; al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 19; Berlin 3578, f. 5b, is slightly different: ‘The Jews said to those from their families who had converted to Islam secretly: “Be upright in what you are in and do what he [Muhammad] says, for it is the truth.” So the verse was revealed.’ Also see al-Qurtubi, I, 365, who adds other reports, found nowhere else, concerning precisely what the Jewish rabbis said.

[9]Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 60 and *Wajiz*, 57; Berlin 3578, f.12b; al-‘Iraqi, f. 4b, ‘Amr asks about gifts for *jihad* and obedience; also al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 42, second report, ‘Amr asks: ‘What shall we give from our possession and where shall we put it?’ Al-Qurtubi, III, 36, with ‘Amr’s words in the first person. Muqatil, *Tafsir*, f. 24a, ‘How much shall we give and to whom shall we give it?’

[10]That there appears to be no halakhic input in the *sabab* is apparent from Ibn al-‘Arabi, I, 145- 46, and al-Jassas, i, 319-21, who do not cite the *sabab* but rather use only the appeal to the *sunna* to elaborate the non-compulsory nature of this alms-giving.

[11]See, e.g., al-Dani, *al-Taisir*, 76, *tas’al* is the reading of Nafi’, *tus’alu*, of all the others.



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- [12]Al-Qurtubi, ii, 92; also see al-Wahidi, *Wajiz*, 32, the only *sabab* there adduced.
- [13]Al-Qurtubi, ii, 92-3; also al-Tabari, ii, 558-9, reports 1875-7; in report 1876, Muhammad repeats the formula: ‘If only I knew what happened to my parents’, *layta shi‘ri ma fa‘ala abawai*, three times.
- [14]Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 36-7; Berlin 3578, f. 8a; al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 28, who gives only the one version about Muhammad's parents, in two renditions, equalling al-Tabari’s reports 1876 and 1877; both reports al-Suyuti considers *mursal*, incomplete in *isnad*.
- [15]See Wansbrough, *Sectarian milieu*, ch. i.
- [16]Al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 29; Berlin 3578, ff. 8a-8b; Muqatil, *Tafsir*, f. 22a.
- [17]Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 79, first report; Berlin 3578, ff. 14b-15a, third report (another possible version: a dead man); Muqatil, *Tafsir*, f. 44b, (donkey corpse); al-Tabari, v, 485-6; al-Qurtubi, III, 300, third report.
- [18]Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 79-80, second report; al-Wahidi’s third report, p. 80, is a comment of ‘Ikrima on the same subject but with no reference to Abraham.
- [19]Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 80, fourth report; al-Kisa’i, 134-5; Berlin 3578, f. 14b, second report; al-Tabari, v, 487; al-Qurtubi, III, 300, second report.
- [20] Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 80-1, fifth report; Berlin 3578, f. 14b, first report, the angel named as ‘Izra’il; al-Qurtubi, III, 300, first report; al-Tabari, v, 487-9.
- [21]Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 36 and *Wajiz*, 31; Berlin 3578, f. 8a.
- [22] R. Blachère, *Introduction au Coran* (2nd ed., Paris, 1977), 233, cited in Nwyia, 61-4.
- [23]Al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 18; also al-Tabari, I, 347-8, report 452 although there are minor differences between the two accounts especially towards the end; there would also appear to be a number of editing or typographical errors in al-Suyuti’s report which I have corrected by reference to al-Tabari.



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[24]Al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 50, first report; similar reports are found in al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 87, first report; Berlin 3578, f. 16a, third report; al-Qurtubi, III, 363.

[25]Muqatil, *Tafsir*, ff. 47a-47b.

[26]Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 88; Berlin 3578, f. 16a; al-Qurtubi, III, 371; also see Ibn al-‘Arabi, I, 245; al- Jassas, I, 473.

[27]e.g., al-Tabari, VI, 30, reports 6277, 6279.

[28]Al-Nahhas, 83-4; also al-Jassas, I, 473.

[29]Al-Tabari, VI, 32, report 6288.

[30]Al-Bukhari, *Al-sahih, kitab al-tafsir*, VI, 30; al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 48, first report and *Waijz*, 50; al- Suyuti, *Lubab*, 36, first report and third report; Berlin 3578, f. 10b, first report; al-Tabari, III, 556-60, reports 3075, 3076, 3080, 3084, 3088; Ibn al-‘Arabi, 100-1 but somewhat more extensive; al-Jassas, I, 256.

[31]See Qur’anic studies, 16-17.

[32] Al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 36, second report; al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 48, second report; Berlin 3478, f. 10b, second report; al-Tabari III in 559-60, report 3087; Muqatil, *Tafsir*, ff. 29a-29b; al-Qurtubi, II, 345.

[33]A. Guillaume, *The life of Muhammad*, 89, somewhat modified; al-‘Iraqi, f. 3b; al-Tabari, III, 559, report 3085; also see W. M. Watt,

‘Hums’, E (2nd ed.), III, 576-7.

[34]Maimonides, *Guide*, III, 29, p. 517; the basic point was made in pre-Islamic times as well, e.g., in the *Letter of Aristeas*.

[35]Maimonides, *Guide*, iii, 48, p. 599; also see Menahem Haran, ‘Seething a kid in its mother’s milk’, *Journal of Jewish Studies*, xxx, 1979, 23-5.



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[36]See al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 42, fourth report and in basic thrust, *Wajiz*, 41, but cf. al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 41, second report; Muqatil, *Khams mi'at aya*, 90, where the tradition is connected to the practice of the Hums.

[37]Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 21, first report; al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 18-19, first report; Berlin 3578, f. 5b., second report; al-Tabari, I, 398, the same as al-Wahidi report.

[38]Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 21-2, second and third report; al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 19, second, third and fourth reports (from 'Abd al-Razzaq in whose *Tafsir* the report would seem not to be found, although there are numerous large water-stains at the beginning of the manuscript making reading difficult); Berlin 3578, f. 5b., first report; al-Tabari, I, 400; Muqatil, *Tafsir*, f. 7a.

[39]e.g., al-Tabari, I, 401, 402.

[40]Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 21, second report; Berlin 3578, f. 5b., first report; Muqatil, *Tafsir*, f. 7a; al-Qurtubi, I, 242.

[41]Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 21-2, third report; al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 19, second and third reports; al-Tabari, I, 400; al-Qurtubi, I, 235.

[42]Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 21, first report; al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 18, first report; Berlin 3578, f. 5b, second report; al-Tabari, I, 398; al-Qurtubi, I, 241-2.

[43]Al-Tabari, I, 400; al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 19. On the 13 verses of *sura* 2 as revealed about the hypocrites, see e.g. al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 19; al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 17; Berlin 3578, f. 5a; *Sufyan al-Thawri*, 41.

[44]*Lubab*, 19.

[45]*Lubab*, 19; compare al-Wahidi, *Wasit*, f. 17b and *Wajiz*, 8, where the Jewish report concerning the parables of the fly and spider is cited. Note that in the order of presentation this is al-Wahidi's second report of three in *Asbab*, yet apparently it is his preferred one; see also Muqatil, *Tafsir*, f. 7a and note that pseudo al-Kalbi, 5, glosses the party as the Jews.

[46]Al-Qurtubi, II, 83.



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[47]Al-Tabari, II, 532-3. Also see al-Qurtubi, II, 81; Ibn al-‘Arabi, I, 35; al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 27, seventh report taken from al-Tabari. The report is also found in *hadith* literature, but not connected to the scriptural verse: see A. J. Wensinck, *A handbook of early muhammadan tradition* (Leiden, 1960), 175, ‘Nadjashi’. Also see Ibn Ishaq, *Sira*, I, 341.

[48]Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, pp. 35-36, fourth report; Berlin 3578, ff. 7b-8a, second report. Cf. al-Tabari’s understanding, II, 532 that the Najashi had not known a *qibla* at all.

[49]Cf. al-Tabari, *Annales* (Leiden, 1879-1901), I, 1473 (as cited in A. Guillaume, *The life of Muhammad, 658-9*) for the death of Khusro and Muhammad’s knowledge of it at the same time as that king’s death; also Ibn Sa‘d, *Tabaqat*, II, 24-5, the king dies at the same time that a delegation from Persia arrives.

[50]Al-Jassas, I, 62, four parallel reports; Ibn al-‘Arabi, I, 34, his fourth opinion; al-Qurtubi, II, 79- 80, first opinion, two reports; al-Tabari, II, 531-2, reports 1841-43, the most frequent reports from Ibn Rabia rejected as weak; al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 34-5, first two reports and *Wajiz*, 31; al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 26-7, fourth, fifth and sixth reports, the sixth report is attributed to al-Kalbi but is much more elaborate than that found in the printed pseudo al-Kalbi text; Berlin 3578, f. 7b, first report.

[51]Al-Qurtubi, II, 80; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabi, I, 35, who gives the dissenting opinions as the Mu‘tazila and al-Shafi‘i.

[52]Muslim, *Al-sahih*, II, 350-3, reports 26-34. This topic of the ‘travel prayer’ is a complex one, extensively treated in Muslim legal literature. Many different types of ‘travel prayer’ are known, each varying according to the conditions in which it is performed. The selections given here from Muslim does not even scratch the surface of the available material. I would like to thank Dr. J. Burton for drawing this fact to my attention.

[53]Al-Qurtubi, II, 80; Ibn al-‘Arabi, I, 35, his third opinion, ‘sound’; al-Jassas, I, 63, sixth opinion, little legal derivation; al-Tabari, ii, 530, two reports from Ibn ‘Umar. The *sabab* also appears in: al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 35, third report attributed specifically to madhhab Ibn ‘Umar; al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 26, first report; briefly, Berlin 3578, f. 8a, third report. It is to be noted that



not all schools of law agreed on the exact restrictions on the practice. See e.g., al-Qurtubi, II, 81.

[54] Al-Qurtubi, II, 80-1; see Wansbrough, Qur'anic studies, 167-9, on *'illa/qiyas* as halakhic deduction.

[55] Al-Tabari, II, 530; also al-Qurtubi, II, 80. See e.g., Muslim, *Al-sahih*, II, 489-94, reports 297-305, for 'prayer of fear' (i.e., when in fear of being attacked) but note no Qur'anic prop. Note that al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, quotes no occasion for Q. 2:239.

[56] Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 73-4, first report, also see his second and third reports, 74-5 and *Wajiz*, 65; al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 46, first report; Berlin 3578, f. 14a, first report; al-Bukhari, *Al-sahih, kitab al- tafsir*, vi, 39-40; al-Tabari, v, 17-21, reports 4927-4938; Mujahid, 109; pseudo al-Kalbi, 26; Muqatil, *Tafsir*, ff. 37b-38a and *Khams mi'at aya*, 186, with full identification of all the actors.

[57] Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 75-6, fourth report; al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 46, second report; Berlin 3578, ff. 14a-14b, second report; al-Tabari, v, 21-2, report 4939.

[58] Al-Qurtubi, III, 158, in five different versions.

[59] Ibn al-'Arabi, I, 201.

[60] Al-Qurtubi, III, 158-9.

[61] Al-Jassas, I, 399-403.

[62] Al-Jassas, I, 402.

[63] Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 24, and *Wajiz*, 21, in more general terms; al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 20, second report (the first report merely says the verse was revealed about *ahl al-kitab*); Berlin 3578, f. 6a; al- Qurtubi, ii, 9, from al-Kalbi and Ibn Ishaq although I have not located a similar report in the *Sira*. Also see Mujahid, 81.

[64] Al-Tabari, II, 270-1, reports 1388, 1393.

[65] Al-Tabari, II, 270, report 1389.



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[66] Al-Tabari, II, 272-3; al-Qurtubi, 11, 9.

[67] Al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 45-6; al-‘Iraqi, f. 6b, somewhat shortened.

[68] Pseudo al-Kalbi, 26; al-Tabari, IV, 588-96, especially report 4893.

[69] Muqatil, *Tafsir*, f. 37b.

[70] e.g., Ibn al-‘Arabi, I, 198; al-Qurtubi, III, 147-8. The report is cited in the works of Malik and al-Shafi‘i; these later works may well be assuming that their readers are aware of the background to the discussions and thus do not feel there is a need to cite the *sabab*.

[71] Al-Tabari, IV, 588-9.

[72] Al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 24; also al-Tabari, II, 460-1, reports 1728-1731, and II, 462-3, report 1738.

[73] Al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 24, fourth report.

[74] Al-Tabari, II, 460-1, reports 1728-1731; also al-Jassas, I, 58.

[75] Al-Tabari, II, 465-6.

[76] Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 31 and Wajiz, 28; also al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 24, second report; Berlin 3578, f. 7a; al-Qurtubi, II, 57; Muqatil, *Tafsir*, f. 19a; also al-Nahhas, 26; Ibn al-‘Arabi, I, 32.

[77] Al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 24, reports six and seven and perhaps three; al-Tabari, II, 461-2, reports 1733-7; al-Jassas, I, 58 makes the transferral Jews-Jahiliyya complete by having the expression as one of mockery to the pagan Arabs. Al-Suyuti, *Lubab*, 24, report five, indicates a combination of reports also: the expression was Arabic, the Jews picked it up, so God prohibited its usage; no explanation is given. On this verse, see David Kunstlinger, “‘Ra‘ina””, BSOAS (Bulletin of the School of Oriental and Africa Studies), v, 4, 1930, 877-82 and Arthur Jeffery, ‘The Qur’an as scripture’, Muslim World, XL, 1950, 260.

[78] Al-Nahhas, 26; also see Makki, 107.

[79] Al-Jassas, I, 58; also Ibn al-‘Arabi, I, 32; al-Qurtubi, II, 57-60.



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[80] Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 20-1; Berlin 3578, f. 5a.

[81] Al-Wahidi, *Asbab*, 21; note that Berlin 3578, f. 5a, presents some alternative identifications for verse 21 as well: the unbelievers (according to al-Suddi) or the hypocrites (according to Muqatil; see his *Tafsir*, f. 6b).

[82] Dr. J. Burton has pointed out to me that this apparent lack of halakhic discussion is reflective of the nature of the sources employed in this study; these sources, he suggests, present only a distillation of discussions going on elsewhere, in this case primarily in *fiqh* literature. This would indicate that there is another entire study to be done, beyond the context of the traditional *'ulum al- Qur'an* to which this study has directed its attention, in order to discover the complete picture of the *sabab* in the Islamic religious sciences, especially as that material relates to halakhic matters.

[83] Ibn Kammuna, *Examination of the three faiths*, text, p. 87, transl., p. 127.

[84] In 2:142 the reference *sa-yaqulu*, 'they will say,' is not elaborated in the *asbab* material; in 2:189a, the idea of 'they will ask you' is likewise not seen as prophetic.

[85] This paper is a distillation of ch. iii, part d, of my 1981 McGill dissertation 'The Qur'anic *Asbab al-nuzul* material: an analysis of its use and development in exegesis'. Thanks are extended to Professor J. Wansbrough, SOAS, and Dr. C. J. Adams, McGill, for their help and encouragement. This paper was read at the Colloquium on Qur'an and Hadith held at University of Cambridge, September, 1985. M. Hinds, P. Crone and G. Juynboll must be thanked for inviting me to the colloquium; the participants at that meeting, especially Dr. J. Burton, were most helpful with their comments.

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