

Asbab al-Nuzul and Irfan A. Khan

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Neither considerations of occasions of revelations nor commentaries of earlier people will be permitted to block the further growth of Quranic understanding
(Irfan Khan)¹

Abstract

Irfan A. Khan (d. 2018) believes the use of asbab al-nuzul (occasions of the revelation) is not only a mistaken methodology to understand the Quran but it is “most fatal to receiving any illumination or guidance from the Quran.” His solution is to understand the Quran as if it were revealed to the current readers just now in their socio-historic circumstance primarily for them for the first time. Khan believes that the Quran and Sunnah/hadith (deeds and written speech of the Prophet) are the two main sources of guidance for Muslims. For Khan the Sunnah/hadith is the Prophet’s guidance to solve the practical demands of God’s commands in the Prophet’s socio-historic circumstance. Since that socio-historic circumstance does not exist, therefore Sunnah/hadith has no legislative value for the generations to follow him. The paper will explain Khan’s position, ‘ulama’s (religious scholars) critique of his proposal, authenticity of the asbab al-nuzul material, and a case study of surah al-Kauthar (108) as a concrete example to understand the Quran with and without the help of asbab al-nuzul material and how its use impacts interpretation.

Keywords: asbab al-nuzul, occasions of revelation, hadith, interpretation, exegeses, understanding.

Introduction

Irfan A. Khan (d. 2018)² is a scholar of the Quran and modern Western philosophy. He seems to present a dynamic Quranic hermeneutic theory and methodology that has potential to answer most of Quranic interpretive problems faced by Muslims today. He belongs to the Farahi school of Quranic interpretation that gives utmost importance to literary contextual interpretation of the Quran. It considers the Quran a highly thematically coherent book. Khan's opening caption in the above informs two obstacles that block the growth of Quranic understanding: use of *asbab al-nuzul* (occasions of revelation) and Quranic commentaries of Muslim exegetes. According to him, the obstacles result in the stagnation of Islamic thought. This paper will consider only *asbab al-nuzul* and their negative or positive impact on Quranic understanding based on Khan's analysis. It will skip the obstacles caused by the use of Muslim exegetical works in understanding the Quran for another paper. Challenges to Khan's proposal may mostly come from *'ulama* (religious scholars), who believe to correctly understanding the Quran requires the knowledge and use of *asbab al-nuzul* genre. Therefore, we will use their critique to Khan's proposal. The paper will evaluate the authenticity of *asbab al-nuzul* material through Andrew Rippin's (d. 2016) seminal paper, "The Exegetical Genre 'asbab al-nuzul:' A Bibliographical and Terminological Survey." Finally, the paper will explore *surah al-Kauthar* (108) as a concrete example to demonstrate how Quranic thought becomes stagnant with the use of *asbab al-nuzul*.

Khan's Position on Asbab al-Nuzul

When Khan states, "considerations of occasions of revelations" will not "be permitted to block the further growth of Quranic understanding," he points to "a very strange, mistaken approach" that blocks the growth of Quranic thought. According to this approach, Khan believes that some Muslims insist "understanding the Quranic *ayat* [verses, sing. *ayah*] in the light of the situation which these *ayat* first addressed," i.e. as understood by the Prophet and his Companions. According to Khan, they believe "there is something wrong in studying these *ayat* as addressing us directly in our present situation" (Khan, 2005. 28). Khan spells out the mistaken approach as follows: "1) first find out what situation was prevailing when an *ayah* or a set of *ayahs* was actually revealed, 2) then understand the *ayah* or *ayahs* in that perspective, 3) once you have, what is according to them the only correct understanding of this part of the Quran, you may relate it to your own situation and, indirectly, derive what would be the Quranic guidance for you"

(Khan, 2005. 28). In order to understand the circumstances in which an *ayah* or a set of *ayat* were revealed, the current readers are required to know and use *asbab al-nuzul* materials.

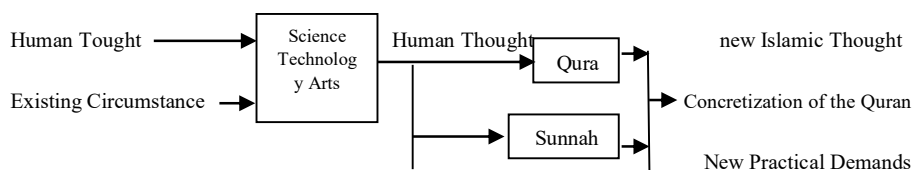
The above methodology creates two problems for Khan: 1) the Quran becomes an indirect source of guidance for all generations except the first generation, 2) it makes the Text static. Regarding the first problem, Khan believes that the Quran is a primary guidance for each new generation till the Day of Judgment (Khan, 1987. 40). For him when we make the knowledge of *asbab al-nuzul* a necessary condition to understand the Quran, it implies that the Quran is primary guidance only for the first readers and secondary or indirect guidance for all other generations. He drives his rationale to consider the Quran as a primary source of guidance for all generations to come from the Quran. According to him, God “has a two-fold relationship with His world: He creates as well as guides (20:50; 87:1-3)” (Khan, 2005. 7). Further, the divine activity of creation and guidance take place continuously (Q 29:55). Implying, that every moment is a new created moment that requires new and fresh guidance. Khan’s Quranic study informs that God has taken upon Himself to guide all of His creations including the humankind.³ The paper agrees with Khan to believe that only God is responsible to provide fresh guidance to the humankind. However, we may wonder how God accomplishes this task in the post-prophetic period in which we live as the Prophet Muhammad is the last prophet and no new prophet will come after him (Q 33: 40). In the absence of a new prophet, Muslims are left only with the Quran as a divine text and the *Sunnah/hadith* of the Prophet as human acts or words to get guidance from. Khan’s solution is to understand the Quran as if it were revealed just now for us in our *current* socio-historical context as a *primary* source of guidance, just as the Prophet understood the Quran in his socio-historic situation. Does this mean that the problems faced by the Prophet and his solutions have no value or relevance to the current readers? Khan believes they are valuable for the current readers also in the sense as the stories of the earlier prophets were beneficial to the Prophet and his Companions. Meaning, for the current readers of the Quran, the Prophet’s and his Companions’ stories are one additional source of stories available to them and the future generation of Muslims (Khan, 2005. 29). In the following we will discuss the nature and relationship between the Quran and the *Sunnah* to get guidance from them as Khan sees it. For Khan the two sources of guidance require two different methodologies of understating them. If the difference in methodologies is comprehended, it eliminates the need to understand the Quran through *asbab al-*

nuzul material which Khan considers a road block in correctly understanding the Quran.

For Khan the Quran is the Divine Text while the *Sunnah* implements divine commands by fulfilling the practical demands of the revelation in the Prophet's *particular socio-historic situation* (Khan, 2005, 8,10, 12). In other words, the *Sunnah* of the Prophet emerges when the Quran is concretized in the Prophet's socio-historic context. In Khan's view the Text has immense possibilities of meaning being the word of God and the *Sunnah* is one meaning free of any mistake concretized in the Prophet's socio-historic situation. For Khan the concretization of the Quran is a continuous process and each successive generation concretizes the Quran in its socio-historic context that may be unique to them but never free of mistakes and thus always subject to change. When Khan sees the *Sunnah* as the fulfillment of the practical demands of the Text, then he does not consider the Prophet's commands as legislation for all other generations except his own. He sees the practical demands in the Prophet's concretization of the Quran "quite independent of the Book." As a matter of fact, Khan categorically states that seeing the Prophet fulfilling the practical demands in his circumstance as legislation for coming generations is a mistake (Khan, 2005. 10-11).⁴ For example, God commands "so whosoever observes the month, should fast during it (Q 2:185)." The Quran does not tell how to determine the start and end of the month of fasting. In the Prophet's historic circumstance, the most accurate way of finding the beginning and end of a month was to sight the birth of a new moon. Therefore, the Prophet announced to observe the birth of new moon and establish the start and end of the fasting month. Khan says that we shall follow the *Sunnah*, i.e. look for the most accurate way of determining the birth of the moon in our socio-historic context. For us the most accurate way of finding birth of the new moon is astronomical calculation. Therefore, we should use it to announce the beginning and end of the month of fasting. According to him, "Only if the *Ummah* and its scholars keep this point before themselves, will they be able to face the great challenges in their way due to possible radical changes in human situations with the advancement of science and technology" (Khan, 2005. 14).

The above point is made by Khan in a different way in his article, "Authenticity and Development of Islamic Thought." By authenticity he means that Islamic thought should be according to the Quran and *Sunnah*, and by development he means growth in which something from the old remains but something new emerges. Khan asks: "What is the dynamic element in Islamic thought" (Khan, 1987. 31)? Interestingly, he finds human thought the dynamic element of Islamic

thought. For him Islamic thought emerges when the human thought filters through the revelation. While this filtering puts a break on the “unrestricted progressive movement of [human] thought,” it is also a source of immense possibilities of the development of Islamic thought when we read the Quran in *our* socio-historic context. Khan believes the source of all human thought is *sam’-baṣar-fuad’ad* (hearing, seeing, thinking/intuiting) (Khan, 1987. 32). All development in human thought happens due to the use of *sam’-baṣar-fuad’ad* as we progress in physical sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Thus, continuous increase in humankind’s knowledge and constantly changing socio-historic circumstance make the human thought dynamic. When we apply our more developed *sam’-baṣar-fuad’ad* due to the development of human thought and in new situations on the Quran, according to Khan, we get new inspiration and guidance from it. This self-reinforcing development in human thought and Islamic thought continues infinitum and we understand the Book better and better as time passes. As far as the *Sunnah* is concerned, when we try to concretize the Quran in our socio-historic circumstance, the *Sunnah* comes to our help and provides guidance as to how we can meet the practical demands of the divine commands in our socio-historic circumstance. Thus, for Khan to gain guidance from the Quran we understand it in our socio-historic circumstance afresh, and to get guidance from the *Sunnah* we understand it in the socio-historic context of the Prophet and learn from it how we should meet the practical demands of God’s commands in our changed socio-historic circumstance. The above understanding can be schematically depicted as follows:⁵



According to Khan, when we read the Quran as a secondary source of guidance for all generations to come after the Prophet, we have to use analogical reasoning to develop solutions from the same or similar first situations. This blocks the growth of Islamic thought as an understanding fixed in time always remains the basis of all future understandings. Further, the first situations cannot cover all coming situations as there may arise entirely new situations that could not have been previously conceived. Khan believes it is logical to face such entirely new situations never conceived before due to humankind’s experiences and continuously increasing new

knowledge through scientific and technological developments. The end result is that “justice cannot be done to all situations that have been deprived of being direct addressees of the Text” (Khan, 1987. 41).

Finally, to understand the first situations *asbab al-nuzul* narratives become a source of preconceived opinions even before the reading of the Text starts. For him to seek guidance from the Quran it is necessary that “no preconceived opinions should direct (or in any way manipulate with) our understanding of it,” as it is “most fatal to receiving any illumination or guidance from the Quran” (Khan, 1987. 38). The sources of opinion can be of others, readers’ own “innovations” or “from some narrow perspectives.” Khan sees *asbab al-nuzul* as others’ opinions or narrow perspectives. It is so as *asbab al-nuzul* data is not reliable according to Muslim’s own critique of the sources. In the later part of the paper we will look into the issue of *asbab al-nuzul* data’s integrity. For Khan, studying the Quran through *asbab al-nuzul* materials’ glasses is decremental for correct Quranic understanding for another reason. He differentiates between “developing within one’s own self an ever growing capacity to understand the Book and understanding the Book in the light of some preconceived opinions” or perspectives. He does not want someone’s pre-packaged understanding of the Quran that is spoon fed to the reader. To him the Quran is a communication between reader and God, a continuous dialog between them. This happens when the reader keeps on developing personal relationship with the Book and through it with God. Therefore, “*Having* a particular understanding, and *developing a capacity to have* such understanding are two very different states of affairs” (Khan, 1987. 38). Let us now review potential traditionalists’ concerns and critique of Khan’s position about understanding the Quran using *asbab al-nuzul* methodology.

‘Ulama ’s or Traditionalist Position

Traditionalists may be sympathetic to some of Khan’s conceptions like reading the Quran as if it were just revealed for the reader, but for them the most difficult aspect of his proposal is to accept Khan’s concept of *Sunnah*, especially when he does not consider *Sunnah* the source of equal legislation as the Quran. Khan does not reject *Sunnah* so he cannot be included in the Quranist groups who reject *Sunnah* of the Prophet. His concern is that the Quran and *Sunnah* cannot be placed in parallel such that the *Sunnah/hadith* becomes judge over the Quran instead of vice-versa. Further, he considers two different methodologies to get guidance from them. With this

cautionary note let us consider traditionalist's view of the *Sunnah* as a critique to Khan's proposal.

Hafiz Anas Nazar in his PhD dissertation, "Hameeduddin Farahi *awr Jamhur kay usul al-tafsir*: A Research and Comparative Study, [Hameeduddin Farahi and Majority '*ulama's usul al-tafsir*]" (Nazar, 2010), presents traditionalist's view in great detail with reference to fully documented traditional sources. We can therefore use his dissertation to present traditionalist's views about understanding the Quran, and in particular the relationship between the Quran and *Sunnah/hadith* of the Prophet. In his dissertation, Nazar critiques Farahi's methodology of understanding the Quran. His critique also applies to Khan, as Khan follows Farahi school's methodology of understanding the Quran. The difference between Farahi and Khan is that Farahi considers *hadith* to understand the Quran only if a particular *hadith* supports Quranic position. Khan, on the other hand, totally overlooks *hadith* when understanding the Quran. Secondly, since *asbab al-nuzul* is part of *hadith* literature, therefore the critique of *hadith* literature can also be considered a critique of *asbab al-nuzul* genre. In his critique, Nazar points out that the Quran and *Sunnah* are primary and *equal* sources of legislation according to the '*ulama* of the *Ummah* (Nazar, 2010. 384). It is so as the Quran is *Wahy-e-Matlu* (revelation from God to the Prophet in God's words) and the *Sunnah/hadith* is *Wahy-e-Ghair Matlu* (revelation from God as an idea expressed in the Prophet's words). According to him, since both are from the same source, therefore rejecting one means rejecting the other. Both must be believed, acted upon, and used to gain guidance from the Quran (Nazar, 2010. 384). This conception of *Sunnah/hadith* is unacceptable to Khan as we noted in the above. Khan accepts that there were communications between God and the Prophet besides Quranic revelations and that some of them were reported to us through *hadith* literature. However, he believes "the texts of these reports do not have the status of Divine Words" (Khan, 2005, 34). To call these extra Quranic communications "revelation" is a definitional matter. If some people want to call this communication "revelation" is not problematic for Khan as long as it is understood they do not have equal status. Let us review in the following if traditional concept of *Sunnah/hadith* can be justified by the historical development of the concept of *Sunnah/hadith*.

Historical Developments in the Concept of Sunnah/hadith

Let us review the development history of the *Sunnah/hadith* through the eyes of an eminent scholar, Fazul Rahman (d. 1988). He is a historian of the Muslim tradition

among other things. He researched the historical development of the concept of *Sunnah/hadith* in great detail in a series of articles from March, 1962 to June, 1963 in the journal, *Islamic Studies*, published by the Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad, Pakistan. His seminal work, *Islamic Methodology in History*, is mostly based on those articles (Rahman, 1995. v). In this study, Rahman considers the *Sunnah* a “behavioral concept.” As a behavioral concept it is “not just a law of behavior (as law of natural objects) but a normative moral law” (Rahman, 1995. 1). Further, for the prophetic *Sunnah*, “the element of normativeness must be prior” to the practice of the community, i.e. the practice of community over long term does not become *Sunnah* unless from the beginning of the Prophet’s prophet-hood his Companions considered his deeds and words normative. Rahman informs that the idea of *Sunnah* in the sense of “exemplary conduct” existed in Arabia before the Prophet, but it was considered neither normative nor in the sense of following it. According to Rahman, after the death of the Prophet up to about the third quarter of the second Muslim century, the *Sunnah* of the Prophet was considered normative but *not intrinsically something to be followed*. However, when someone decided to fulfill a *sunnah* (exemplary conduct) the sense of fulfillment came into being both in the pre-prophetic Arabia and through about the third quarter of the second Muslim century, according to Rahman.

Rahman claims that the Prophetic *Sunnah* was normative but not intrinsically something to be followed up to the third quarter of the second Muslim century can be demonstrated by “numerous” examples in the early Muslims sources. For example, “Abu Yusuf [d. 181/798] admonishes Harun al-Rashid [d. 809] (see his Kitab al-Khiraj, the chapter on Sadaqat) asking the Caliph ‘to introduce (as distinguished from ‘to follow’) some good sunnahs’” (Rahman, 1995. 2-3). In the same passage, Abu Yusuf quotes a *hadith*: “‘whoever introduces a good sunnah will be rewarded ... and whoever introduces a bad sunnah ... etc.’ Meaning a bad *sunnah* can be introduced” but the meaning of following it is not included in the concept of *sunnah* as no one establishes a bad *sunnah* expecting it to be followed. Further, “From the concept of normative or exemplary conduct” emerges the concept of a standard of “correctness” or “straightness.” For example, Rahman points out the Arabic idiom, “sananal-tariq” means “the path straight ahead,” or “the path with no deviations.” According to Rahman, the implication of normative conduct as standard of “correctness” or “straightness” does not lead to the “prevalent view that in its *primary* sense (my emphasis) sunnah means ‘the trodden path’ is not supported by any unique evidence.” Though Rahman acknowledges logically and secondarily “a straight path without deviations implies that the path is

already chalked out which it cannot be unless it has been already trodden.” Hence, *Sunnah* in its meaning can imply a trodden path, but it does not automatically mean that it must be followed. Rahman explains another shade of meaning from the term *Sunnah* as “mean between extremes.” Since from a “straight path without deviations to the right or to the left also gives the meaning of ‘mean between extremes’ or the ‘middle way’” (Rahman, 1995. 3-4). Again, the concept of “the middle way” can be attributed to *Sunnah* but it also does not require automatically following it. Rahman provides many more examples to make this point. The next development in the concept of *Sunnah* emerged with a new sense of *Sunnah* having legislative value in the Muslim history. Let us consider it in the following.

Rahman’s analysis shows that in the early post-prophetic era, i.e. the end of the third quarter of the second Muslim century, the concept of the *Sunnah* of the Prophet remained “an exemplary [‘authoritative’ or ‘normative’] president” with no legal binding of following it or giving it a legislative value. By the time of Malik B. Anas (d. 179 A.H.), it became “an agreed practice” of the “Companion or a subsequent authority although it is not divorced by the general concept of the prophetic *Sunnah*” (Rahman, 1995. 14). By the general concept of the prophetic *Sunnah*, at a theoretical level, Rahman means an “umbrella concept, rather than filled with an absolutely specific content.” At the practical level, the *Sunnah* as a behavioral term implied that “since no two cases, in particular, are ever exactly identical in their situational setting – moral, psychological and material – *Sunnah* must, of necessity, allow of interpretation and adoption” (Rahman, 1995. 12). Rahman notes that there is “abundant historical evidence” to demonstrate this understanding. This “Living *Sunnah*” or “Ideal *Sunnah*,” i.e. “a pointer in a direction rather than an exactly planned laid-out series of rules” was the result of rational “personal free thought” activity called “Ra’y” or “personal considered opinion” that produced an immense wealth of legal, religious, or moral ideas during the first century and a half approximately” (Rahman, 1995. 14-5). The instrument that generated the Living *Sunnah* was *Sunnah-Ijtihad-Ijma* complex, (*Ijtihad*: personal mental effort, *Ijma*: consensus). This means when a new problem emerged, first the Ideal *Sunnah* was looked at then the Ideal *Sunnah* (“under the direction, of the spirit (not the absolute letter) in which the Prophet acted in a given historical situation”) was interpreted through *Ijtihad* or *Qiyas* (analogical reasoning) that was firmed over time through the process of *Ijma*” (Rahman, 1995. 15). According to Rahman, the *Sunnah* in this sense allowed second century “aphorism: The *Sunnah* decides upon the Quran; the Quran does not decide upon the *Sunnah*” (Rahman, 1995. 19). Without Rahman’s sense of the *Sunnah*, Rahman considers the

second century aphorism not only “shocking” but “blasphemous.” Due to the democratic nature of the process, *Ijma’* was never absolute. The voices of difference remained with the general acceptability of the dominant opinion agreed upon by the community over time. The downside of this process was that “the product of this activity became rather chaotic, i.e. the ‘*Sunnah*’ of different regions – Hijaz, Iraq, Egypt, etc. became divergent on almost every issue” (Rahman, 1995. 15). This situation required stability and uniformity that was achieved through a different sense of the *Sunnah* which worked well to address the existing instability but it turned the *Sunnah* into a static rule-based *Sunnah* through the *hadith* movement led by Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi’i (d. 204/820). The instrument of change was achieved when the *Sunnah-Ijtihad-Ijma’* complex changed into *Sunnah-Ijma’-Ijtihad*. The *Ijma’-Ijtihad* pair “instead of being a process and something forward-looking – coming at the end of free *Ijtihad*” having to accomplish in future became “something static and backward looking (Rahman, 1995. 24). Secondly, the *Sunnah* no longer remained “a general directive but [became] as something absolutely literal and specific and whose only vehicle is the transmission of *hadith*” (Rahman, 1995. 23). The *Sunnah* of the Companions of the Prophet (peace be on him), in particular, the first four *Chaliphs* also required the same “something absolutely literal and specific” with *hadith* only its vehicle of transmission at this stage. Hence, when the concept of the *Sunnah* and *Ijma’* became fixed, *Ijtihad* generated from them was static and with no space for disagreement. From the above historical analysis, Rahman’s position comes close to Khan’s position. Both consider the *Sunnah* as a normative and directional concept with the exception that Khan does not want to use it in understanding the Quran but accepts it to provide guidance about the practical demands of God’s commands when the Quran is concretized in the current and future generations in their socio-historic circumstances. The traditionalists on the other hand, according to Rahman’s analysis, hold a concept of *Sunnah* which developed in the fourth decade of second Muslim century. Thus, Nazar as a representative of the traditional Muslim position about the Quran and *Sunnah* being primary and equal sources of legislation is a concept almost two hundred years Muslim century’s position (Nazar, 2010. 384).

Rahman’s above analysis shows that by the time of al-Shafi’i there was a need to achieve stability and uniformity in legal decisions. This was accomplished by changing *Sunnah-Ijtihad-Ijma’* complex to *Sunnah-Ijma’-Ijtihad* complex. The methodology worked and it controlled geographic variations in legal decisions. However, one must realize that it was achieved by finite prone to mistake actors and hence can never be taken as permanent or sacred. The unintended consequence of

the change was to make the concept of the *Sunnah* static from dynamic “Living *Sunnah*.” Khan believes that due to a totally new situation that the Muslims face today after the advent of modernity, development of physical and social sciences, Muslims need to return to the original conception of “Living *Sunnah*” as practiced by the *salaf* (Caliphs and early generation of scholars). One may ask would reverting back to the original understanding of the *Sunnah* will once again open the door of instability and chaos in legal decisions as it did the first time? Khan in his corpus has generally restricted himself to problems and solutions in understanding the Quran and seldom spoke about legal issues. However, he is very clear in his conception that the Prophet’s fulfilling the practical demands of the divine revelation in his historic situation cannot be considered having legal value for the coming generations. As a matter of fact, he proposes that this principle should also apply to all past *Shari’ah* solutions (Khan, 2005. 11). It can be argued that chaos in legal decisions will not exist in our time as we live in the political boundaries of nation-states. There would be uniformity of legal derivation within one nation-state, though there may be variations in legal opinions from one nation-state to another. The inter nation-state legal diversity in opinions can be seen as a blessing in disguise, because after some time it may become clear which nation-state’s legal judgement about a legal matter is the best and other nation-states may also adopt it if they so desire. A final note to close this discussion is that Rahman presented his research on the historical development of the concept of the *Sunnah* in 1962. His research results made some people upset at that time but no one since then has proven him wrong. Khan would agree to some of Rahman’s conclusions regarding the nature and purposes of the Living *Sunnah*. This Living *Sunnah* is not only authentic but it is also progressive. It may open the gates for using reason within an Islamic framework. Let us now turn our attention to another dimension of *asbab al-nuzul* genre, the authenticity of this material that traditionalists want us to depend upon to understand the Quran and which Khan considers a mistaken methodology.

Authenticity of asbab al-nuzul Literature

Andrew Rippin⁶ provides an extensive bibliographical and terminological survey of the exegetical genre *asbab al-nuzul* works written in Arabic by Muslims (Rippin, 1985. 1-15). Rippin critically evaluates the historical value of the sources starting from Ibn ‘Abbas (d. 68/687) up to ‘Attiya Allah ibn ‘Atiya al-Ujhuri (d. 1190/1776). He believes that sources beyond the twelfth/eighteenth century onwards have no independent value as they are “culled” from the classical sources.

Rippin's survey concludes that only four texts are valuable that contribute to *asbab al-nuzul* genre from the classical sources as of today.⁷ Among the four texts 'Ali ibn Ahmad Allah al-Wahidi (d. 430/1038) is the earliest who contributes the most.⁸ Therefore, we will only detail his work. Al-Wahidi's book, *Kitab asbab al-nuzul al-Qur'an*, contains *asbab* for various verses in the eighty-three *surahs* of the Qur'an. Among the individual *asbab*, the reports "are in the form of *hadith* reports, with full *isnad*," going back to a companion of the Prophet or an early authority (Rippin, 1985. 5). The sources of the *hadith* reports are by Bukhari (d. 256/870), Muslim (d. 261/875), and al-Hakim (d. 404/1014). According to Rippin, "Frequently one encounters a truncated *isnad*, the report simply being ascribed to Mujahid (d. 104/722), Muqatil ibn Sulayman (d. 150/767), al-Kalbi (d. 146/763) or the like" (Rippin, 1985. 5). Finally, "At other times, absolutely no ascription is given to a *sabab* report." Yousef Waleed Meri,⁹ a member of Qatar Foundation for Education, agrees with Rippin's findings. However, he goes further. Meri in the English translation of al-Wahidi's *Asbab* book's introduction quotes al-Wahidi that if an occasion was transmitted without "narration and transmission from those who have witnessed the revelation and were aware of the occasions," such people may face hell fire (Meri, 2008. viii). Meri exclaims, "It is therefore remarkable and surprising to discover that al-Wahidi did not always heed his own warning." Not only some occasions from him are "pure guess work" but the "book is replete with expressions such as: "'Qala al-Mufassirun' [the commentators of the Quran said], 'Qala Ahlu al-'Ilm' [the scholars said], 'Qala al-Suddi' [al-Suddi said] and 'Qala al-Kalbi' [al-Kalbi said]" (Meri, 2008. viii). Meri considers these expressions "personal opinion rather than transmission." According to Meri, "Al-Wahidi was never recognized as a scholar of *hadith*, but his lack of expertise in this field is clearly manifest in his book *Asbab al-Nuzul*. This is indeed the main and most serious drawback of the book" (Meri, 2008. x). Despite all these flaws, Meri still considers his *Asbab al-Nuzul* "an invaluable piece of scholarship" from a historical point of view as it remains the first extant source of *asbab al-nuzul* genre that collects the *asbab* in one single volume.

Rippin's research on the development of this genre is also important to understand the authenticity of the *asbab al-nuzul* genre. His study "indicates a late rise in the use of the term" (Rippin, 1985. 14). His first observation is that the terms like "'and the *sabab* of that verse being revealed was' or 'that was the *sabab* of that verse'" is not found in early exegetical works, e.g. in the exegesis of Mujahid (d. 104/772), Muqatil (d. 150/767), Sufyan al-Thawri (d. 161/778), or early *sira* works of Ibn Ishaq (d. 151/768), al-Waqidi (d. 207/823), or in the *Kitab al-tafsir* sections

of *ḥadīth* collections of *Bukhari* or *Muslim* (Rippin, 1985. 14). This is remarkable. Why is it that these relatively early sources do not use *asbab* literature? Rippin determines, "The actual term *sabab* seems to begin to make its appearance in the *tafsīr* of al-Tabari (d. 310/922) and the *naskh* work of al-Nahhas (d. 338/950)" (Rippin, 1985. 14). In these works the term seems to be in its evolution to the eventual technical term of *sabab*: "the transmission of the *sabab* of the revelation of a *sura* or verse and the time, place and so forth of its revelation."¹⁰ For example, al-Tabari in his "discussion of the banishment of the word *ra'ina* in Q. 2:104" uses *sabab* in the sense of "the prohibition of the word" and not as "the reason (*sabab*) for the revelation of the verse" which according to Rippin is "later technical sense of the term" (Rippin, 1985. 14) literature. Rippin finds many "other instances of this same kind of semi-technical-but not-quite usage ... throughout the *tafsīr*." According to Rippin, "It is only with al-Jassas (d. 370/981) that the term *sabab* would appear to be used with any regularity and to win its fully technical sense and phraseology in introducing reports about the revelation of the Quran" (Rippin, 1985. 15). Rippin concludes: "it was perhaps only a century earlier [than al-Wahīdi, i.e. after around 368 A.H.] that the term *sabab* became fixed" and "marked out" (Rippin, 1985. 15). It can be argued that technical sense of different terms in general takes time for their development. Therefore, it should not be a surprise that the term *sabab* got fixed after about three hundred seventy years. The problem in this case is that even the concept of *sabab* is not found in early exegetical works or in the *ḥadīth* collections of *Bukhari* or *Muslim*.

It is also interesting that al-Wahīdi's understanding or description of *asbab* is still challenged. According to Meri, "Muslim scholars, especially in the last three centuries" have been "more critical in their assessment of the usefulness and importance of the occasions of revelation."¹¹ For example, the latest understanding that has emerged over this period and to which Khan also scribes is that *sabab* occasions "the revelation of this part of the Book at that time," instead of "any situation, which the Prophet or his people faced, occasioned any part of the Divine Book" (Khan, 2005. 29). While these scholars have questioned and modified this genre's understanding, Khan is unique who totally rejects *asbab al-nuzul* for understanding the Quran.

It is for the above reasons, (unreliable *sabab* materials, late sources, and late development of the genre), that Khan objects judging something that is firm and authentic, i.e. the Quran, with something uncertain, i.e. *asbab al-nuzul* literature. He considers it a great injustice to the Quran to read it through the eyes of *asbab al-nuzul* literature (Khan, 1987. x). Further, he sees using *asbab al-nuzul* to understand

the Quran, mixing divine words with the human words. When Khan reads the Text, he finds himself in the divine world of the Text that he wants to understand through the divine words only. After gaining insights, inspirations, and guidance by the reading, he brings them down to the human world. He looks to the human Prophet how he concretized the insights in his socio-historic circumstance for guidance. This differentiation and separation of the divine world and human world is an important contribution of Khan's hermeneutics and a major reason to avoid *asbab al-nuzul* literature to understand the Quran.

Asbab al-Nuzul: A Case Study in the Light of Surah al-Kauthar

Let us explore the case of *surah al-Kauthar* when understood with and without *asbab al-nuzul* genre to realize Khan's concerns concretely. The choice of *al-Kauthar* is pertinent due to its short length and some of its terms that beg clarification through *asbab al-nuzul* literature. In the case study, we will examine key issues in the *surah* by four scholars, Ibn Kathir (d. 1373), Farahi (1930), Maududi (d. 1979), and Muhammad Asad (d. 1992). The four scholars represent important aspects of *asbab al-nuzul* literature use. Three key issues in the *surah* are taken as representative of subjects requiring the use of *asbab al-nuzul* literature: where the *surah* was revealed, how *al-Kauthar* and *abtar* are understood, and what guidance current readers can get from the exegeses of the four scholars. After this review we will take up Khan's understanding of the *surah* for the same issues without the use of *asbab al-nuzul* literature.

Ibn Kathir considers this *surah* Meccan and Medinan (Kathir, 606). He explains the *surah* through *hadith* literature and uses only authentic *hadiths* in his explanations. Ibn Kathir narrates two authentic *hadiths* – one *hadith* tells the *surah* is Meccan and the other tells the *surah* is Medinan.¹² The obvious contradiction does not bother him nor does he try to reconcile it. What seems to matter to him is that if a *hadith* is authentic, it should be narrated and explained with respect to the *surah* or *ayah* under study. The result is utter confusion in terms of what to believe as contradictory explanations may be present side by side, as is the case with the place of the revelation of *surah al-Kauthar*. Farahi believes the *surah* was revealed during Medinan period at the occasion of the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah but considers the *surah* Meccan (Farahi, 1991. 456). His rationale is that '*ulama*' agree when a *surah* is revealed after *hijrah* but close to Mecca then the *surah* is considered Meccan. Hudaibiyyah is close to Mecca and hence the *surah* is Meccan. For Maududi, the *surah* is Meccan but for a different reason (Maududi, 1989. 488-89).¹³

He narrates Anas bin Malik's two *ḥadīths* that are considered authentic and which Ibn Kathir also explained. One *ḥadīth* calls the *surah* Meccan and the other Medinan. However, Maududi's project is to remove any contradictions in understanding the Quran. He resolves the contradiction by stating that Anas's *ḥadīth* which calls the *surah* Medinan must be a misunderstanding on Anas' part. According to Maududi, the *ḥadīth* does not tell the subject of discussion between the Prophet and his Companions when Anas arrived. Therefore, when the Prophet said that *surah al-Kauthar* was revealed to him just now, the Prophet meant that he remembered the *surah* for the occasion at hand as it perfectly applied to the issues at hand (Maududi, 1989. 488-89). Since Anas only heard the Prophet say the *surah* was just revealed to him, he could not have understood the real purpose of the Prophet saying that. Therefore, Maududi concludes the *surah* cannot be Medinan. Finally, Asad mentions the period of revelation of the *surah* "uncertain" and does not refer to any *asbab al-nuzul* material about the *surah* in his translation and explanation (Asad, 1984. 980). Let us continue our review of the four scholars about other issues in the *surah* in relation to *asbab al-nuzul* literature.

Ibn Kathir translates *al-Kauthar* as *hawuz* (pond), a canal in the heaven, and "a lot more [good]" given to the Prophet." Among the many goods, *Kauthar* as a pond is also included (Kathir, 5668). For Farahi, *al-Kauthar* is the *Ka'ba* which is the source of all blessing for the Prophet and his *Ummah*. He sees the *surah* as the fulfillment of Abraham's prayer, Q 2: 126-27, in favor of the Prophet and his *Ummah*. The second *ayah* of the *surah* is a clue for Farahi that *al-Kauthar* is *Ka'ba* as the *ayah* speaks about prayer and *naḥar* (animal sacrifice) that are performed near *Ka'ba*. Since he sees the *surah* revealed at the occasion of the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, therefore he also considers it was the Prophet's command to slaughter the animals to indicate 'umrah (pilgrimage) would not be performed that year (Farahi, 1991. 454). Maududi considers *al-Kauthar* the good of every kind in this world and in the hereafter. He lists all the goods given to the Prophet as noted in *ḥadīth* literature on the meaning of *Kauthar* including *hawuz* and the heavenly canal. However, Maududi finds an additional good not mentioned by the other scholars: "The good of system of life based on easily understandable principles that are according to human reason and nature. These principles are concise and universal and have the power to spread all over the world forever and ever" (Maududi, 1989. 492). For Asad *Kauthar* is "all that is good in an abstract, spiritual sense, like revelation, knowledge, wisdom, the doing of good works, and dignity in this world and in the hereafter" given to the Prophet (Asad, 1984. 980). Further, through the Prophet the good is given to "every believing man and women" (Asad,

1984. 980). For him the highest good is the “*ability* to acquire knowledge, to do good works, to be kind towards all living beings, and thus to attain inner peace and dignity” (Asad, 1984. 980). However, we do not find any mention of “the canal Kawthar” or “pond” on the earth in Asad’s explanation.

Ibn Kathir considers *abtar* as one or all of the following persons: 1) Al-‘As bin Wa’il who hated the Prophet because the Prophet came with “guidance, truth, clear proof and manifest light.” Such people are “the most cut off, meanest, lowliest” persons who would be forgotten, 2) The *surah* was revealed for ‘Uqbah bin Abi Mu’ayt, Ka’b bin Al-Ashraf, “a group of the disbelievers of the Quraysh,” and Abu Lahab (Kathir, 5670-671); Farahi considers *abtar* the demise of Quraysh - good news of coming victory for the Muslims; Maududi takes it to mean “a person from whom all hope is gone and no good is expected to come,” also *abtar* are all persons pointed by different *hadiths* as noted by Ibn Kathir above; for Asad, “it is he that is cut off,” i.e. one who hates the Prophet and hence is “cut off” from “all that is good” (Asad, 1984. 980). Asad seems to imply we can find *abtar* persons among us today and its meaning is not limited to the Prophet’s era. In the case of *abtar*, all exegetes agree on the meaning of *abtar* as a person, though the identity of this person is different for each exegete.

What do our scholars say about getting guidance from this *surah*? None of the scholars talk about guidance or even a lesson learned from the *surah*. Ibn Kathir lists contradictory aspects with no clarification what the reader should believe after reading the *surah*. Maududi quotes largest number of *hadiths* and points to a clear understanding of the *surah*. He shows us how the Prophet and his Companions would have understood the *surah*. Leaving the current reader with no guidance that could be used in his socio-historical circumstance. Asad also explains the whole *surah* as the Prophet would have understood it, though in a shorter narrative. The result is that today’s readers when try to understand the *surah* through our four scholars, all of them come out knowing some historical information but no guidance. Khan would consider it a big loss as generally most believers read scripture to get guidance from it and live their lives accordingly. Let us now turn to Khan about the above issues and see how he understands them in the following.

Khan understands the *surah* in five steps. Each step leads to deeper meaning and guidance. In the first step he looks at the Arabic text of the *surah* in one visual field.¹⁴ This allows him to view the Arabic text without any pollution of human words. Interestingly, he does not mention if the *surah* was Meccan or Medinan. The reason is Khan does not want to consider even this small human addition to the

word of God.¹⁵ Further, determining the *surah* as Meccan or Medinan blocks to understand the *surah* as a fresh new revelation just revealed for the reader in his/her socio-historic context. In the second step Khan translates each word independent of the *ayah*'s or the *surah*'s literary context. This step would have been unnecessary if all his readers were Arabic speakers. The word by word translation helps to some extent break the language barrier for non-Arabic readers. Khan in his methodology of understanding the *surah* emphasizes to reflect on the *surah*. His word by word translation provides the opportunity to non-Arab listeners or readers to reflect on the translated words, though knowing the reflection will be at a lower level than reflecting on the *surah* in Arabic. His word by word translation of the words of the *surah* is: *innaa* ("Verily We"), *a'taina* ("We have given"), *ka* ("you"), *al-Kauthar* ("al-Kawthar"). *Fa* (therefore), *salli* (pray), *li* (for), *Rabbi* (Lord), *ka* (your), *wa* (and) *anhar* (sacrifice). *Inna* ("Verily"), *shanika* ("one who hates you") *huwa* ("is the one (who) is"), *alabtar* (lopped off). For all three *ayahs*, the word by word translation seems to have general meanings of the Arabic words in English. In this step, Khan does not clarify who "you" is and what is "*al-Kauthar*" in the first *ayah*; *nahar* is translated as "sacrifice" instead "to cut the throat (of an animal), slaughter, butcher [or] kill (an animal)" in the second *ayah* (Wehr, 1979. 1111); and "abtar" is translated as "this person who hates you" but we do not know the identity of the person yet. In the third step, Khan sees the meaning of each *ayah* in the *surah* independent of other *ayahs*, as for him an *ayah* is the smallest unit of meaning/sign in the Quran.¹⁶ The *ayah* conscious translation is: "1). Verily, We have given you (O Prophet) *al-Kawthar* (The Abundance of Good). 2). Therefore, pray (offer *salah*) to your Lord and sacrifice. 3). Surely, one who hates you is the one that is lopped off" (Khan, 2013. 173). At the *ayah* level we find out "you" is the Prophet and *al-Kauthar* is "the abundance of Good." Other elements still remain unknown. The fourth step consists of *ayahs* and the *surah* hermeneutical circle.¹⁷ According to Khan, "the *surah* makes its point in three stages: "A. [*Ayah 1*] **Proclamation from the Divine Authority**, the Prophet is given *al-Kauthar* which is something whose blessing will keep on increasing. The something is identified as the Quran whose blessings will keep on increasing as its understanding will grow with increasing human knowledge and there will be increasing peace, justice and happiness; "B. [*Ayah 2*] ... **the Recipient should, therefore, do:** i) make *salah* ..., ii) make sacrifice ...;" "C. [*Ayah 3*] ... **the Recipient of Kauthar not to worry**" as the opposition to the Quranic Movement "will wither away." In this step we see Khan's interpretation of Kauthar as the Quran. The good news is that the movement which was started with the reading of the Quran will succeed. In the fifth step Khan

understand the *surah* in the hermeneutical circles of adjacent *surahs* and the Quran as a whole. According to him, the “previous *surah* pointed that false religiosity is doomed.” This *surah* shows what the true religiosity is (prayer and sacrifice). If the believing community continues to reflect on the Quran in their increasing abilities to understand due to advances in human knowledge in their changing situation, the Quranic guidance will bring more and more peace and justice in the human world. **“Therefore, it is required that the Quranic Community maintains a living relation with the Divine Words.”** We may note that Khan’s above exposition does not require the historical information from *asbab al-nuzul* or any other source. He seems to read the *surah* in his present circumstance with a clear message and a program of action: the individual Muslim and the community as a whole has the instrument that can change their destiny if they do their job of worshipping God and making sacrifice (e.g. of time, money, etc.), God will take care of their enemies. Their enemies will lose in the end. Therefore, believers should do their work of reading and understanding the Quran and developing personal relationship with God. However, worship only is not enough, sacrifice is also required of them. If we compare our scholars’ understandings and Khan’s, we see they look back to the past with no guidance for today or future, whereas Khan refers to the past but only through the word of the Quran to understand what Quran wants to tell us what it told the Prophet, then understands the *surah* in the present with a concrete agenda of what believers should do in their present circumstance.

Conclusion

From Rippin’s study and Meri’s discourse it is clear that *asbab al-nuzul* material is not reliable. Further, *asbab al-nuzul* in its technical sense understood as a cause that brought down certain revelations is a late development. In addition, over the last three hundred years this genre is critically reviewed and its importance or use is challenged by Muslims scholars. Khan has questioned the very basis of *Sunnah/hadith* as having legislative value and its use to understand the Quran. Khan’s view is supported by Farahi who wants to understand the Text in its literary context and not from external sources, unless they support the text’s position. Rahman’s analysis showed that the concept of *Sunnah* changed after about one and three quarters Muslim centuries. During these centuries, *Sunnah* had no legislative value. It was only a normative behavioral concept and did not require following it. Rahman’s study in his book, *Islamic Methodology in History*, was published in 1962. Since then it is not challenged by anyone. Khan’s proposal not to use *asbab*

al-nuzul to understand the Quran asks the readers to consider divine revelation a communication with God directly and afresh to get illumination, insight, and guidance for the existential problems they face in their socio-historical situation. This is possible when the divine words are read without mixing them with human words or having pre-conceived ideas through human historical understandings. He asks of his readers to look to the human prophet to get guidance how the Prophet concretized divine words in his socio-historic circumstance. As far as *'ulama*'s critique of Khan's ideas is concerned, one may conclude that it does not apply to Khan as their rules to understand the Quran are based on the foundation raised by al-Shafi'i's reform. It may have been necessary for the problems al-Shafi'i faced in his socio-historic circumstance but it cannot be made a permanent understanding or change for the rest of Muslim generations to come. We can therefore conclude Khan has a strong case how the Quran and *Sunnah* are two sources of Islamic guidance and how they require two different methodologies to get guidance from them. Finally, the study of *surah* al-Kauthar case study shows how the use of *asbab al-nuzul* becomes a hinderance in understanding the word of God on its own terms. It is therefore, the paper recommends that the *asbab al-nuzul* genre should be remove from the Ulum al Quran category to get fresh guidance from the Quran.

Note

1. Irfan A. Khan, "Authenticity and Development of Islamic Thought," *International Journal of Islamic and Arabic Studies* 4, no. 2 (1987): 38.
2. For details of Khan's biography, theory and methodology of Qur'anic hermeneutic, please see "An Introduction to the Qur'anic Hermeneutic of Irfan A. Khan," *Islamic Studies*, 56, no. 1-2 (2017), and my PhD dissertation, "Understanding and Qur'anic Revelation: The Dynamic Hermeneutic of Irfan A. Khan," Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago, (2016).
3. See Q 36:37-40, 87:2-5, 16:68-69, 23:14, 32:9.
4. Khan proposes the same solution for *Shari'ah* (Khan, 2005. 11).
5. The schematic is my depiction.
6. Non-Muslim western scholars' mechanical research, non-ideological but data driven, as a result of their historical analysis of Muslim sources can be freely used in research by Muslim believers. For example, Andrew Rippin's paper on the

bibliographical and terminological survey of *asbab al-nuzul* is one such case. Therefore, it is extensively used in the paper for the historical value of *asbab al-nuzul* data.

7. The other three sources are: 1) al-'Iraqi (d. 567/1171), *Asbab al-nuzul wa qiṣaṣ al-furqaniyya*; 2) Berlin 3578 (pseudo al-Ja'bari (d. 732/1333); 3) al-Suyuti [d. 911/1505], *Lubab al-nuqul fi asbab al-nuzul*.
8. Among the four, al-Suyuti's *Lubab al-nuqul* is also important. However, Yousef Waleed Meri says, the work "might be considered a slight improvement on the classical contribution of al-Wahidi." Hence, it is not mentioned in the paper. Also, al-Suyuti comes about four centuries after al-Wahidi.
9. Meri taught at Hamad bin Khalifa University (HBKU), Qatar. He is a member of Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development and faculty associate (non-resident) at the Center for the Study of Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations in Merrimack College, North Andover, MA, USA.
10. Hajji Khalif, *Kashf al-zunun 'an asamiy al-kutub wa'l-funun*, as quoted by Rippin in "The exegetical Genre "asbab al-nuzul:" A Bibliographical and Terminological Survey," 1.
11. Meri mentions various such scholars and their understanding of the use of this genre. For example, Shah Waliullah al-Dahlawi (d. 1176/1762), Hameeduddin Farahi (d. 1930), Amin Ahsan Islahi. (d. 1997), and Muhammad al-Tahir ibn 'Ashur (d. 1973).
12. Both *ḥadiths* are by Anas bin Malik. In the first *ḥadith*, Anas informs that the Prophet was among us and he dozed off. After that he smiled. When asked why he smiled, the Prophet said that *surah al-Kauthar* was just revealed to him. Since Anas never lived in Mecca, based on this *ḥadith* the *surah* is considered Medinan. The second *ḥadith* by the same Anas informs that the Prophet observed the canal al-Kauthar during *M'raj* which took place in Mecca.
13. All English translations of *Tafhim* are mine.
14. Certainly, it is not possible for longer *surahs*. However, in such *surahs* he tried to look at the smaller units of the *surah* as one unity with its Arabic text.
15. The determination of a *surah's* place of revelation (Meccan or Medinan) is by the human beings and not God. This is agreed by all in the Muslim tradition.
16. Please see details of this process in my dissertation: "Understanding and Qur'anic Revelation: The Dynamic Hermeneutic of Irfan A. Khan."

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