

# THE REASONS FOR THE REVELATION OF THE QUR'AN AND THE SOCIETY OF PROPHETIC MISSION: CONTINUITY OR DISJUNCTION? CONTEXT AND THE CONCEPT OF "LATE ANTIQUITY"

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## Abstract

This study revolves around examining the various connections and disjunctions between the narratives of the "occasions of revelation" (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) and the society of the prophetic mission (the society of revelation) in the Arabian Peninsula during the first third of the 7th century CE. We revisit these relationships considering a proposition we offered in the conclusion of our dissertation on the "occasions of revelation" (2005), which asserts that "the relevance lies in the specific cause, not the general wording." This proposition radically overturns a well-established principle in classical Qur'anic sciences that emphasizes "the relevance lies in the general wording, not the specific cause." We argue that this methodological choice anchors the Qur'an more firmly within its social context—as a text formed gradually, received with either acceptance or objection by the society of the prophetic mission, and interacting dynamically with historical events and their constraints.

This study is built on the fundamental hypothesis that the meanings of a significant number of Qur'anic verses cannot be fully grasped through textual context alone but rather require connection to their broader social and historical settings. This necessitates a renewed focus on the reports of the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, which, at least in part, preserve the memory of the believers during the time of the prophetic mission—a memory that reflects their social and religious concerns, as well as their various responses to the new religion, ranging from full acceptance to outright rejection, and the nuanced positions in between.

Moreover, the hypothesis assumes that a portion of these reports—transmitted orally from generation to generation before being committed to writing—contains a historical core around which layers of events and interpretations were constructed over time, often obscuring the original nucleus, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

**Keywords:** *Asbāb al-nuzūl*, Society of the Prophetic Mission, Religious Imagination, Historical Projection, Interpretive Act, Context, Late Antiquity.

## INTRODUCTION

The intellectual foundation upon which this study is built stems from a conclusion we reached in our doctoral dissertation, which offered a critical historical analysis of the reports concerning the "occasions of revelation" (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) of the Qur'an. That conclusion posits that "the relevance lies in the specific cause, not in the general wording"—a finding that fundamentally inverts a long-standing principle in the classical Islamic sciences, namely, that "the relevance lies in the general wording, not in the specific cause." This traditional view, as we see it, effectively dismisses the historical context in which Qur'anic verses were revealed, favoring instead the generalization of rulings to formulate legal maxims, behavioral norms, ethical standards, or other frameworks.

Our perspective—then as now—is that reversing this principle firmly grounds the Qur'an in its historical context: as a gradually formed text, received either with acceptance or objection by the society of the prophetic mission, and as one that actively engages with the events and constraints of history.

The core hypothesis of this research is that the meanings of a significant number of Qur'anic verses cannot be fully understood through textual context alone. Rather, they must also be connected to their broader social and historical settings. This necessitates a renewed examination of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports, which, at least in part, preserve the memory of the believing community during the time of the prophetic mission. That memory gives voice to their religious and social concerns on the one hand and expresses the degree of their engagement with the new faith—ranging from full acceptance to outright rejection and including the entire spectrum in between—on the other.

Furthermore, the hypothesis assumes that a portion of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports—transmitted orally across generations before being committed to writing—contains a historical core around which, over time, layers of narrative and interpretation have accumulated, often obscuring the original event either deliberately or inadvertently.

At the outset, it is worth briefly and synthetically recalling the most important statistical findings we reached following an in-depth study of the reports on the occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) as found in the principal sources: the Prophetic sīra, ḥadīth collections, tafsīr works, Qur’anic sciences treatises, and specialized books on *asbāb al-nuzūl*. These findings can be summarized as follows:

- The earliest cultural setting in which reports of *asbāb al-nuzūl* circulated was the gatherings of storytellers (*quṣṣāṣ*) and early chroniclers (a phase of oral transmission of knowledge), beginning in the second half of the first Islamic century (late 7th century CE).
- Nine-tenths of the Qur’anic verses do not have known occasions of revelation. For example, the number of verses with such reports in al-Wāḥidī al-Naysābūrī’s (d. 468 AH / 1075 CE) book *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* is 629 verses, which corresponds to only 10.08% of the total number of verses in the Qur’an.
- Over 80% of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports center on informative (narrative) verses. This indicates that only around 20% relate to verses containing rulings or legal prescriptions—those that later constituted the two major fields of Islamic jurisprudence: acts of worship (*‘ibādāt*) and social transactions (*mu‘āmalāt*). This data challenges the widespread assumption among many classical and modern scholars of Qur’anic sciences that most of the occasions of revelation are primarily linked to legal matters.
- A significant number of reports attributed to the occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) appear to be fabricated or invented. They seem to have been constructed solely to justify a particular social behavior, to affirm a legal ruling or command, or to lend legitimacy to a given practice. As such, these reports are not deserving of scholarly trust today. Even al-Wāḥidī himself warned in the introduction to his *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* of the widespread fabrication and falsification in the transmission of such reports. For instance, the number of Qur’anic verses associated with specific occasions of revelation by the end of the 3rd century AH (9th century CE), as found in al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr*, stood at 564. Yet by the end of the 9th century AH (15th century CE), this number had increased to 857 in al-Suyūṭī’s *Lubāb al-Nuqūl*, meaning at least 293 additional verses had come to be associated with occasions of revelation that were previously unknown in al-Ṭabarī’s time.
- One-third of all *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports are transmitted solely through Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 58 AH / 677 CE), although he was only about twelve years old at the time of the Prophet’s death—thus making him an indirect witness to the revelation, particularly the Meccan revelations. A triad of second-generation transmitters (*tābi‘ūn*)—namely, Qatāda al-Sadūsī (d. 117 AH / 735 CE), Mujāhid ibn Jabr (d. 103 AH / 721 CE), and ‘Ikrima al-Barbarī (d. 105 AH / 723 CE)—were responsible for transmitting nearly a quarter of the entire corpus of *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports.

The statistical data presented above will undoubtedly assist us in examining the actual or potential historical connections—or disconnections—between the *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports and the society of the Prophetic mission, namely the community of the Companions. This necessity has led us to structure our intervention around three major thematic axes:

- *Asbāb al-nuzūl* and the Society of the Prophetic Mission: A Relationship of Continuity
- *Asbāb al-nuzūl* and the Society of the Prophetic Mission: A Relationship of Disjunction
- Context and the Discourse of "Late Antiquity"

### 1 - *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* and the Society of the Prophetic Mission: A Relationship of Continuity

Despite the infiltration of fabrication and invention—manifested in varying degrees and through multiple forms affecting either the chain of transmission (*isnād*), the content (*matn*), or both—within the reports of *asbāb al-nuzūl*, these narratives nonetheless provide valuable insights into the conditions and concerns of the early Muslim community. They reflect the social, daily, religious, doctrinal, moral, and existential preoccupations of the Companions, both in their lived experiences and in their reflections on destiny and the hereafter.

Moreover, the oral origins of these reports do not, in theory or practice, preclude the possibility that they have conveyed to us—first through memory, then through textual documentation—a range of historical events or collective representations of what transpired within the society of the Companions. This includes various reactions, whether acceptance or resistance, to the new religion and to the Prophet himself.

Our position is to present selected examples of these events and representations, which will be examined in the following four sub-sections.

#### 1. 1 Social Relations

Within the reports of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*, we find references that illuminate the Prophet Muhammad’s relationship with Quraysh—a relationship largely marked by tension and verbal confrontation. This tension was exacerbated by the fact that Muhammad’s prophethood was not supported by material proofs or miracles akin to those attributed to earlier prophets such as Moses or Jesus. For instance, the reason behind the revelation of verse 59 of Sūrat al-Isrā’ (17:59) is that the people of Mecca demanded from the Prophet that he turn Mount Ṣafā into gold and remove the surrounding mountains so they could cultivate the land (Wāḥidī, 1998).

The Prophet himself was subjected to verbal and physical harm, which led to the revelation of verse 53 of Sūrat al-Isrā' (17:53): "*And tell My servants to say that which is best. Indeed, Satan sows discord among them. Indeed, Satan is a clear enemy to mankind.*"

This material harm also extended to some of the earliest converts to Islam. Such persecution is historically plausible given that the Prophet was no longer merely an individual confronting the tribal clout of Quraysh, which was invested in protecting its commercial interests and religious authority (e.g., overseeing the Ka'ba and managing its services such as provisioning and water supply).

As a result, acts of brutality occurred—for example, the torture and eventual killing of 'Ammār ibn Yāsir's parents. This specific incident is directly linked to the revelation of verse 106 of Sūrat al-Naḥl (16:106) (Wāḥidī, 1998).

The Prophet's relationship with Quraysh was further reflected in the *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports concerning his military expeditions (*sarāyā*) and battles (*maghāzī*), especially following his forced migration from Mecca to Yathrib/Medina, where he remained until his death. A key example is the incident involving 'Abd Allāh ibn Jahsh's expedition (d. 3 AH / 624 CE), known as the *Battle of Nakhlah*, which took place seventeen months after the Hijrah. The circumstances of this expedition led to the revelation of verse 217 of Sūrat al-Baqara (2:217): "*They ask you about fighting in the sacred month. Say, 'Fighting therein is a grave matter; but averting [people] from the path of God, disbelief in Him...'*"

The account behind the verse indicates that the Prophet had dispatched a detachment to gather intelligence on a Quraysh caravan arriving from Tā'if during the month of Muḥarram. However, a confrontation ensued, resulting in the killing of one caravan member and the capture of two others. The Prophet reacted with intense anger to this act, which had violated a deeply rooted social norm in the tribal Arab system—that of refraining from violence during the sacred months. Such a breach was highly plausible, and it appears that the Prophet may have anticipated this risk.

This possibility is suggested by the fact that he gave a sealed letter to the commander of the Nakhlah detachment, instructing him not to open it until they reached their assigned location (al-Wāḥidī, 1998). The letter stated: "*Proceed with the blessing of God, along with those who follow you from among your companions, until you reach the valley of Nakhlah. There, observe the Quraysh caravan; perhaps you will bring us some news.*" (Wāḥidī, 1998) Moreover, the likelihood that the last portion of the letter may have been added later is strong—especially when comparing al-Wāḥidī's version to an earlier one by al-Wāqidi (d. 207 AH / 822 CE) in his *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, which ends with the simpler directive:

"*Proceed with my order, with those who accompany you, until you reach the valley of Nakhlah and observe the Quraysh caravan.*" (Wāqidi, 1989)

The difficult circumstances faced by the Prophet and his Meccan Companions (the Muhājirūn) during the early months of their residence in Medina compelled them to undertake an action that may not have been intended to result in bloodshed. At that moment, independent of later rulings on the permissibility or prohibition of fighting, the pressing need to act took precedence. The imperative of survival sometimes outweighs doctrinal commitments or the boundaries drawn by social conventions regarding what is deemed permissible or forbidden.

Thus, the *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports point to events that were very likely grounded in historical reality. These reports reflect images or collective representations of the Prophet's relationship with the Quraysh, both before and after the Hijrah. They also reveal the Prophet's interactions with his Companions during key events, such as the Battle of Badr in the third year after the Hijrah, as seen in the reason for the revelation of the first verse of Sūrat al-Anfāl (8:1) (Wāḥidī, 1998), or during the Battle of Uḥud, which occasioned the revelation of verse 12 of Sūrat Āl 'Imrān (3:12) (Wāḥidī, 1998). Moreover, they highlight the Prophet's dealings with the so-called "hypocrites" (*munāfiqūn*), including 'Abd Allāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl (d. 9 AH), as in al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr* (1999).

It is well established today that collective representations of historical figures and events are shaped by a key principle in historical research: every recollection of past events transmitted through writing or documentation is necessarily conditioned by the constraints of the present of the transmitter of the report, who is chronologically distant from the original historical event. This present is marked by the interplay of numerous influences and factors, including the narrator's cultural background, sectarian affiliation (in jurisprudence and creed), personal temperament, the epistemic status of knowledge (whether characterized by transmission, accumulation of reports, critique, verification), prevailing cultural norms, religious imaginaries, and the expectations and cognitive frameworks of the report's audience.

## 2. 2 On the Performance of Religious Rituals:

The *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports include examples of the behavior of several Companions during their performance of certain acts of worship, focusing primarily on the pillars of prayer and fasting. One such report, narrated by Ibn 'Abbās, explains the reason for the revelation of verse 24 of Sūrat al-Ḥijr (15:24). He states:

"A beautiful woman used to pray behind the Prophet (peace be upon him) among the last rows of women. Some men would position themselves in the front row to avoid seeing her, while others would stand in the back row. When they bowed in prayer, they would look through their armpits [to catch a glimpse of her]. Then the verse was revealed: '*We surely know those of you who hasten forward, and We surely know those who lag behind*'" (Wāḥidī, 1998).

This report indicates that some of the Companions deliberately stood in the back rows during congregational prayer to surreptitiously glance at the beautiful woman while bowing. Here, we are presented with a paradox: the tension

between the desire to take pleasure in a woman's beauty and the expected state of reverence and humility that should occupy a Muslim while standing before his Creator.

This incident, preserved in the memory of the community and transmitted through tradition, reflects how the early Muslim society grappled with the convergence of human inclinations and spiritual ideals during the formative moments of ritual practice.

Let it not be assumed that the purpose of citing the report is to mock or ridicule the behavior of the noble Companions during the performance of certain religious rituals. Rather, the aim is to highlight a particular characteristic that distinguished religious practice in the early community of the Prophet, especially during the initial phase of revelation (noting that *Sūrat al-Hijr* [15] is classified as Meccan by early scholars). This was a spontaneous and unregulated form of religiosity—not yet subject to the strict norms that would gradually take shape in later Muslim societies. It was the jurists, primarily, who would undertake the task of systematizing religious rituals and codifying the proper procedures for their performance under both ordinary and exceptional circumstances.

In another report concerning the reason for the revelation of verse 43 of *Sūrat al-Nisā'* (4:43), it is stated:

"It was revealed regarding a group of the Prophet's Companions who would consume wine and attend prayers while intoxicated, being unaware of how much they prayed or what they recited during their prayer" (Wāḥidī, 1998).

Qur'anic scholars further recount the story of 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Awf (d. 32 AH / 652 CE), who once led the Maghrib prayer while intoxicated, causing him to confuse the verses of *Sūrat al-Kāfirūn* (109), which he was unable to recite correctly (Wāḥidī, 1998).

Once again, we emphasize that the purpose of presenting this account is not to belittle the devotional conduct of the Companions, disparage their piety, or cast doubt upon their sincerity. Rather, it is to illustrate how a deeply ingrained social practice—namely, the consumption of wine—continued to exert influence over individuals who had only recently embraced Islam and were still adjusting to its ritual demands. Moreover, the Qur'anic rulings on wine progressed in stages: initially forbidding prayer while intoxicated (4:43), later enjoining its avoidance (5:90), yet without ever declaring its prohibition through an explicit and unequivocal formula.

In a third report, Qur'anic scholars have discussed one of the fasting regulations that was practiced in the early Muslim community—the community of the Prophet's mission. This rule prohibited the Companions from engaging in sexual relations, eating, or drinking after the 'Ishā' prayer during the month of Ramaḍān. However, it appears that even some of the prominent Companions did not strictly observe this rule, nor did they consider its breach to constitute a punishable offense or one necessitating the application of legal penalties. A clear illustration of this can be found in a report transmitted by Ka'b ibn Mālik (d. 50 AH / 670 CE), concerning the reason for the revelation of verse 187 of *Sūrat al-Baqara* (2:187):

"In Ramaḍān, if a man fasted and then slept at night, food, drink, and women became forbidden to him until he broke his fast the next day. 'Umar returned from the Prophet (peace be upon him) after spending the evening with him. He wanted his wife, and she said, 'I have already slept.' He replied, 'You have not slept,' and then had intercourse with her..." (Suyūṭī, 2002).

This report places us in an early stage of the Prophet's community—namely, within the first or second year after the Hijra—during which the rulings concerning fasting in Ramaḍān were not yet implemented with strict rigor, nor was their violation met with disciplinary action or legal punishment. Hence, 'Umar acted spontaneously, as one still navigating the transition between longstanding social habits and the emerging norms of the new religious order—torn, as it were, between conscious and unconscious desires shaped by past patterns of behavior.

### 3. 3 On the Relationship between Muslims and the People of the Book:

Most of the reports concerning the reasons for revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) that pertain to the Prophet's relationship with the Jews fall between two key phases: the first was an early stage in which the Prophet sought to win them over to the new religion—Qur'anic address during this period frequently used the phrase "O Children of Israel" (e.g., *al-Baqara* 2:40; *Tāhā* 20:80; *al-Ṣaff* 61:6). The second phase was marked by military confrontation, and the Qur'an began referring to them using the term "those who became Jews" (*al-ladhīna hādū*), as in *al-Nisā'* 4:46 and *al-Mā'idā* 5:69.

One indication that these reports fall between these two phases lies in the nature of the questions the Jews posed to the Prophet. These questions revolved around matters of prophecy, the afterlife, legal rulings, and divine reward and punishment. As such, they appear to have prompted the revelation of several verses—for example, *Sūrat al-Nisā'* 4:153 and *Sūrat al-Mā'idā* 5:49 (Wāḥidī, 1998). This demonstrates that the disputations between the Prophet and the Jews were a major theme in *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports and can be regarded as historical occurrences that took place within the Prophet's community.

However, one of the more significant roles played by these reports in this regard was to provide justification for the military actions the Prophet was compelled to take against Jewish factions in Medina after they had declared hostility toward him and the broader Muslim community—both the Emigrants (*Muhājirūn*) and the Helpers (*Anṣār*). A case in point is the reason for the revelation of *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān* 3:72, which is detailed in Ibn Sa'd's *Ṭabaqāt* (1994). Similarly, the reason for the revelation of verse 188 of the same *sūrah* concerns incitement by the Jews of Medina against the Prophet, including efforts to stir up Jewish communities in Iraq and Yemen (Wāḥidī, 1998). Furthermore, the attempted assassination of the Prophet by the Banū al-Naḍīr—an act from which he escaped miraculously—was the direct cause for the revelation of *al-Mā'idā* 5:11 (Wāḥidī, 1998).

These examples drawn from reports on the reasons for revelation regarding the Prophet's relationship with the Jews were later utilized by biographers, exegetes, and Qur'anic scholars to justify the punitive measures imposed by the Prophet on the Banū al-Naḍīr (exile and expulsion) and the Banū Qurayza (capital punishment as retribution). What matters for our present purpose, however, is that these reports abound with references to specific individuals, identifiable places, and precise times—factors that increase the likelihood that the events they describe indeed occurred in historical reality. It is therefore unsurprising that the Prophet would confront the Jews who were hostile to him, as a means of defending both the nascent religion and the fragile Muslim community.

What we conclude from examining these instances of connection between the *asbāb al-nuzūl* and the community of the Prophet's mission is that any reader of the Qur'anic verses needs extra-textual knowledge to grasp the historical background of revelation. The Qur'an, in most cases, merely alludes to events in a brief and elliptical manner. It generally refrains from providing detailed narratives with clearly identified agents, places, and timelines. This reflects the nature of the Qur'an—not as a book of history, but as a text that carries within it a spirit of history.

Moreover, a few of the reports on the reasons for revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) themselves contain what might be termed a “core” of historically plausible events. There is nothing within these cores that violates the laws of nature, the dynamics of civilization, or the norms of social life. One could even argue that the very silences in the Qur'an are what motivate scholars of its verses to fill in the gaps using whatever reports and narratives are available to them—sources they regard as indispensable tools for reconstructing the lost historical background of revelation. This need became even more pronounced after the decision was made to arrange the verses and chapters of the Qur'an according to the order of recitation, rather than the chronological order of their revelation.

This reconstruction took place through two main methods: reliance on what are believed to be the reasons for revelation, and the interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of Qur'anic verses (Usman et al. 2021). Hence, one may justifiably ask: were we wrong to suggest that whenever the text is silent, the scholars begin to speak?

## 2 - The Reasons for Revelation and the Early Muslim Community — A Relationship of Disconnection

It is worth recalling that the early Muslim community (the “Community of the Call”) had no real need to inquire into the reasons for the Qur'an's revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), as they were direct witnesses to those very circumstances. The need to investigate and document these reasons arose only with the generation of the *Tābi'ūn* (Successors) and subsequent generations. This was due to a convergence of several factors — notably, the organization of Qur'anic content according to the sequence of recitation rather than chronological order, and the influx of diverse peoples into Islam as it expanded beyond the borders of the Arabian Peninsula. These new adherents brought with them varied cultural heritages, including pre-Islamic religious traditions. Consequently, their connection to the original context of revelation was essentially nonexistent.

It goes without saying that scholarly interest in the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (reasons for revelation) was historically linked, first, to accounts of the Prophet's military expeditions (*maghāzī*), and second, to exegetical activity following the standardization of the Qur'anic text and the codification of Islamic sciences. Qur'anic scholars—particularly after the fifth century AH, once the major exegetical trends, legal schools, and theological doctrines had been established—recognized the need for rigorous criteria governing the narration of *asbāb al-nuzūl*. One of the most notable of these methodological conditions was formulated by al-Wāḥidī al-Naysābūrī, who declared:

“It is not permissible to speak on the reasons for revelation except through narration and transmission from those who witnessed the revelation, were aware of its causes, and diligently sought knowledge of them.” (Wāḥidī, 1998) In practice, however, Qur'anic scholars—including Wāḥidī himself—did not consistently adhere to this principle, which remained largely theoretical. The evidence for this is the sheer number of reports concerning reasons for revelation that were transmitted by minor Companions or by later transmitters and chroniclers who lacked any direct connection to the original community of the Prophet. This methodological flaw opened the door to fabricated reports, a problem I have addressed in earlier work by identifying signs of manufactured *asbāb al-nuzūl* through linguistic and contextual indicators in the Qur'anic text—such as interrogative forms, generalized discourse, and the blurring of Meccan and Medinan contexts (Jemal, 2005).

On this basis, we can affirm the existence of a clear disjunction between many *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports and the actual historical community of the Prophet. This disconnection can be analyzed through the following three levels:

### 1. 1 Historical Projection:

Exegetes and Qur'anic scholars have, in many instances, inserted into the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (reports of reasons for revelation) concepts, theological doctrines, and legal debates that had no existence whatsoever in the original context of the early Muslim community (*Mujtama' al-Da'wa*). This insertion can largely be explained by the influence exerted on transmitters—or even fabricators—of these reports by the concerns and intellectual climate of their own historical contexts, particularly in the domains of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and theology (*kalām*).

A case in point is a report narrated by Abū Hurayra:

“The polytheists of Quraysh argued with the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) regarding *qadar* (divine decree), whereupon God revealed the verse: ‘Indeed, the criminals are in error and madness... Indeed, We created everything by decree’” (Q 54:47–49). (Rāzī, 1988)

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606 AH / 1209 CE) added:

“And it is also reported from the Prophet (PBUH) that this verse was revealed regarding the *Qadariyya*.” (Rāzī, 1988)

It is evident that the discussion of *qadar*—as part of the broader theological debate over human agency and divine predestination—was not a topic addressed during the Prophet’s time, nor did it form part of the intellectual preoccupations of the early Muslim community. Rather, the early emergence of this debate is historically situated around the mid-first century AH, beginning with the *early Qadariyya* (forerunners of the Mu‘tazila). It is well established that the initial stirrings of theological reflection on divine decree and human free will were associated with figures such as Ma‘bad al-Juhānī (d. 80 AH / 699 CE) in the Ḥijāz, and Ghaylān (d. 106 AH / 724 CE) and ‘Amr al-Maqsūs (d. 83 AH / 702 CE) in Damascus. These early Qadarites—and later the Mu‘tazila—championed the notion that human beings possess full autonomy over their actions.

This clearly illustrates that the chronological gap between the revelation of Sūrat al-Qamar (54)—a Meccan surah—and the theological debate over *qadar* (divine decree) spans, at the very least, half a century. The reason exegetes may have fallen into such an instance of historical projection is likely due to their encountering the word *qadar* in verse 49 of the surah, prompting them to interpret it considering later theological controversies involving the Qadariyya and the Mu‘tazila—doctrinal opponents of the Sunni orthodoxy known as *Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jamā‘a*.

In contrast, a more contextually coherent interpretation of this Qur’anic formulation comes from the Mu‘tazilī exegete Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā‘ī (d. 303 AH / 915 CE), who explained the verse as follows:

“That is, We created everything in a measured and determined manner according to what wisdom demands—not arbitrarily or randomly. Thus, even the punishment was created in proportion to desert (*istiḥqāq*), and likewise, everything in this world and the next was created in a precisely measured way.” (Tabrisī, 1997)

Another illustrative example of historical projection appears in a report transmitted by Umm Hānī bint Abī Tālib (d. 40 AH / 660 CE) regarding the reason for the revelation of Sūrat Quraysh (106). The report reads:

“The Prophet said: God has granted Quraysh seven privileges that were not given to anyone before them, nor will they be given to anyone after them: the Caliphate is among them, the custodianship of the Ka‘ba (*ḥijāba*) is among them, the provision of water to pilgrims (*siqāya*) is among them, prophethood is among them, they were granted victory over the People of the Elephant, they worshipped God for seven years when no one else did, and a surah was revealed in which no one but them was mentioned: ‘*For the convening of Quraysh*’.” (Wāhidī, 1998)

This narration explicitly refers to a political institution that did not yet exist in the time of the Prophet: the Caliphate. As is well-known, this institution emerged only gradually and was initially shaped by tribal norms and mechanisms of consensus—particularly in the selection of Abū Bakr as the first caliph. It is therefore implausible that the Prophet could have predicted the precise course of future political arrangements in the Muslim community. Such foreknowledge is, according to the Qur’an itself, denied even to the Prophet: “*Say: I do not possess for myself any benefit or harm except what God wills. And if I had knowledge of the unseen, I would have acquired much good and no harm would have touched me.*” (al-A‘rāf 7:188).

The report concerning the reason for the revelation of the surah functioned as a means of legitimizing the Qurayshī clan’s exclusive claim to political authority, to the extent that Quraysh lineage—at least in theory—came to be considered a prerequisite for the caliphate. This function aligns with a broader principle: the need to provide religious justification for political institutions.

## 2. 2 Turning Qur’anic Metaphor into Literal Truth:

The Qur’an incorporates a wide range of discourses—pertaining to prophethood, legislation, narrative, parables, praise, and ethics (Arkoun, 1990). Of particular concern here is its use of metaphor and illustrative analogy. The Qur’an often employs these rhetorical devices to render the values of the Muhammadan message more accessible to its audience. Indeed, one could argue that metaphor in the Qur’an fulfills a similar function to that which it holds in classical Arabic poetry.

The desire among exegetes and scholars of the Qur’an to identify reasons for the revelation of as many verses as possible led them, at times, to disregard the figurative nature of certain passages. A clear example of this can be seen in the interpretation of verses 75 and 76 of Sūrat al-Naḥl (16), which read: “Allah sets forth the example of a slave who has no power over anything... And Allah sets forth the example of two men: one of them dumb, unable to do anything, a burden on his master...”

Upon close reading, these two verses appear to be part of a broader reflection on the disparity in provision among humans, as reinforced by verse 71 of the same surah. Furthermore, God Himself cautions His servants against the use of analogies—a rhetorical mode He reserves for Himself. In this case, God uses parables to illustrate the concept of inequality among the morally responsible (*al-mukallafīn*) in terms of merit and sustenance.

However, instead of interpreting the verses in line with their figurative and rhetorical intent, many exegetes pursued historically grounded causes for their revelation, effectively transforming metaphor into historical fact. Thus, verse 75 was said to have been revealed about Hishām ibn ‘Amr, who was known for spending his wealth both secretly and openly. As for verse 76, the mute man was identified as Usayd ibn Abī al-‘Īs, while the one who “commands justice” was said to be ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān (Wāhidī, 1998).

It appears that reducing metaphor to literal historical reference has obscured the rhetorical beauty and eloquence inherent in these two verses. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, perceptive in this regard, discerned the intended meaning of the verses—an insight that many classical exegetes overlooked. According to Rāzī, the metaphor in verse 75 “is general, applying to every slave with such a description and every free person with such a description. This is the more evident view, as it aligns with what Allah intended in this verse—and Allah knows best” (Rāzī, 1988).

He supports his interpretive stance by explaining that “the purpose is to compare one image with another in a particular matter; such a comparison is only effective when one image serves as a measure against the other” (Rāzī, 1988).

Following a similar approach, many exegetes interpreted the analogies found in verses 19 and 20 of Sūrat al-Baqara (2) as literal events that occurred during the lifetime of the Prophet. This interpretive method rests on a literalist reading of the Qur’anic text, as seen, for instance, in Qurṭubī’s commentary (1996).

### 3. 3 Products of the Religious Imaginary:

The reports of *asbāb al-nuzūl* abound with products of the religious imaginary. These products reflect collective perceptions and representations, which the “New History” school (*La nouvelle histoire*)—emerging in the late 1970s—has integrated into the core of historical analysis (Le Goff, 1977). In other words, imaginary is no longer seen as opposed to history, but rather as one of its constitutive elements. Contemporary scholars—particularly historians and philosophers—have come to recognize that the human being is inherently multidimensional, and that the imaginary can, in fact, act as a motor of history (Castoriadis, 1975).

In earlier work, I proposed a definition of the religious imaginary as referring to “the set of semiotic products—linguistic and non-linguistic—constructed by *homo religiosus* in their relationship with the transcendent, the absolute, or the immanent, in an attempt to respond to questions concerning origins, worldly matters, and eschatological concerns—either some or all of them” (Jemal, 2014).

The ancient world was inhabited by invisible beings, influenced by spirits, and governed by unseen forces. From within this worldview, the Islamic imaginary became active and infiltrated a portion of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports. Thus, it fulfilled a set of functions and objectives desired by scholars and their audiences alike. For instance, the figure of Gabriel (Jibrīl) appears in numerous reports to perform the following roles:

Establishing the hierarchical rank of certain Companions in terms of virtue (occasion of revelation: al-Nisā’ 4:60) (Wāḥidī, 1998).

Guiding the Prophet’s exercise of *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) (occasion of revelation: al-Nisā’ 4:34) (Wāḥidī, 1998).

Providing spiritual support to the Prophet in times of hardship (occasion of revelation: al-Furqān 25:10) (Wāḥidī, 1998).

In addition to the frequent presence of angels in many *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports (e.g., al-Nisā’ 4:97, 148; al-Ra’d 13:10–14), the Islamic imaginary employed elements of nature to fulfill various symbolic and theological functions, such as:

Presenting a miracle to convince skeptics: the splitting of the moon on two occasions in Mecca (occasion of revelation: al-Qamar 53:1) (Qurṭubī, 1996).

Punishing a man who mocked God and His Messenger: a sudden lightning strike kills the man (occasion of revelation: al-Ra’d 13:13) (Wāḥidī, 1998).

The Prophet’s prayer is immediately answered with heavy rainfall for a people stricken by drought (occasion of revelation: al-Wāqī’a 56:82) (Wāḥidī, 1998).

A radiant light emerges from a rock struck by the Prophet and Salmān al-Fārisī during the digging of the trench (occasion of revelation: Āl ‘Imrān 3:26) (Wāḥidī, 1998).

The presence of the Islamic imaginary is also evident in narrating events that defy the law of causality. Such events appear in a few *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports, where the suspension of natural cause-and-effect relationships served various functions, including:

#### – Immediate retaliation against the Prophet’s opponents:

Al-Ḍaḥḥāk ibn Muzāḥim reported the occasion of revelation for verse 25:27 of *al-Furqān*. He said: “When ‘Uqba spat in the face of the Prophet (PBUH), his spittle rebounded onto his own face and split into two streams, burning both of his cheeks. The marks remained on him until his death” (Wāḥidī, 1998). In another report, during the Battle of Khaybar, the Prophet shot an arrow from a long distance toward a fortress. The arrow flew until it struck Kināna ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq, who was lying on his bed inside the fortress, killing him. This event was linked to the revelation of verse 8:17 of *al-Anfāl* (Wāḥidī, 1998).

#### – Exhortative (moralistic) function:

An example of this function is the report related to the occasion of revelation for verse 4:94 of *al-Nisā’*. A Companion deliberately killed a Muslim man to seize his belongings. The Prophet was deeply angered by this heinous act.

“Not long after, the murderer died and was buried. But in the morning, his body was found next to his grave. They buried him again, only for his body to be found above the ground once more — this happened two or three times. When they saw that the earth would not accept him, they cast his body into one of the ravines...” (Wāḥidī, 1998). Commenting on this miraculous event, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110 AH) remarked:

‘The earth has covered people worse than him, but this was a lesson to the people so that they would not repeat such deeds’ (Wāḥidī, 1998).

In conclusion, the products of the Islamic imaginary—as illustrated by the examples we have presented—reflect the collective representations that shaped the intellectual outlook of Muslim scholars as they engaged with the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation). These scholars sought to ensure the wide dissemination of such representations across generations by attributing the transmission of the reports containing them to renowned Companions and prominent Successors in particular.

From our perspective, *asbāb al-nuzūl* narratives informed by the Islamic imaginary are a *post-factum* production—formulated and circulated among communities of faith after the dissolution of the original "Community of the Call" (*Mujtama' al-Da'wa*). The key evidence for this is the fact that investigating the causes of revelation was never a central concern for the Prophet's Companions themselves, as previously noted. This is especially true considering that the majority of the Qur'an, at that time, still existed primarily as oral discourse, preserved in memory and in hearts, and passed along informally among a limited circle of Companions.

### 3 - Context and the Concept of "Late Antiquity"

Context represents a fundamental component in discourse analysis, as it contributes directly to determining the meanings derived from various types of discourse—be it political, religious, literary, historical, or commercial (Brown & Yule, 1997). In fact, context is integral to the process of understanding itself (Brown & Yule, 1997). Therefore, we must carefully consider the context in which the Qur'an was first circulated: an oral communicative setting among a limited group of individuals, and simultaneously, a context of confrontation—in its various forms—between the Prophet and his Companions on the one hand, and Quraysh and the Jewish tribes on the other (Rubin, 2024).

Certainly, the Qur'an has transmitted aspects of these confrontations, though such transmission—whether oral or later written—has been subject to the inherent features of narrative discourse, such as emphasis and suppression of particular meanings, as well as syntactic techniques like reordering, foregrounding, and backgrounding of linguistic units.

In contrast to this textual context lies a broader historical context: the temporal and spatial conditions under which texts and intellectual or religious productions are exchanged. Scholars—particularly historians—tend to situate the Qur'an within a historical period conventionally referred to as Late Antiquity.

It is worth recalling here that during the last two decades of the twentieth century, and particularly within the field of Qur'anic Studies, numerous scholarly articles and books were published that included the expression "Late Antiquity" in their main or subtitles. Among these works are Angelika Neuwirth's *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage* (2019), and Aziz Al-Azmeh's *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People* (2014).

Most scholars tend to agree that the temporal span of Late Antiquity stretches from the late third century CE (without pinpointing an exact year) to the year 750 CE, according to the Irish historian Peter Brown, a leading specialist in Late Antiquity (Neuwirth, p. 167). This terminal point corresponds precisely to the fall of the Umayyad Caliphate in the East, which occurred in 132 AH / 750 CE.

When situating the Qur'an within the broader framework of Late Antiquity, it becomes evident that the Qur'anic discourse bears, to some extent, a connection with the cultural legacy of the ancient Near East. This period was also marked by widespread religious attitudes and practices such as ascetic piety, as well as pervasive eschatological ideas—including expectations of a savior, and a rich corpus of literature on resurrection and the afterlife.

Moreover, it is possible—albeit approximately—to delineate the socio-geographic scope within which the Qur'an circulated during the Prophet's mission. Around the year 600 CE, the population of the Arabian Peninsula was estimated to be between 1.5 and 2 million people. In Mecca specifically, the number of inhabitants ranged between 2,000 and 3,000, concentrated in a densely populated area that did not exceed 80,000 square meters—or 8 hectares, an area roughly equivalent to the Place de la Concorde in Paris (Caratini, 1992).

Contemporary scholars have adopted the framework of Late Antiquity as a critical reference point for situating the Qur'an within its historical context. As a result, the understanding of the chronology of revelation is no longer exclusively confined to a specific sub-discipline of Qur'anic studies, namely the science of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* (occasions of revelation). There is no doubt that the events, incidents, reports, and legal rulings found in the Qur'an are tied to historical referents—yet our knowledge of those referents remains fragmentary, due to several factors. Among them are the method of compilation and arrangement of the Qur'an based on recitation order rather than chronological sequence, which led to the erasure of the historical timeline of revelation, as well as the Qur'an's own minimal emphasis on specifying historical references behind the events it recounts.

While reports of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* do offer material that could, at least in part, help reconstruct the context of revelation, such material must be subjected to rigorous historical criticism. It has become clear that many of these reports bear no verifiable link to the actual community of early believers (the Prophet's Companions). This necessitates adopting the Qur'an itself as the primary reference point from which to critically examine these reports—rather than the reverse, as was the prevailing methodology throughout the classical Islamic tradition and in most modern studies of the occasions of revelation that we have reviewed.

This approach to engaging with reports of the occasions of revelation (*Asbāb al-Nuzūl*) goes beyond the efforts of classical Orientalist scholarship, which sought to periodize Qur'anic revelation into four distinct phases—three Meccan and one Medinan—based on several criteria, including thematic content, surah length, and rhetorical style. Accordingly, they divided the Qur'anic surahs into four chronological groupings.

Regardless of the critiques that might be leveled against this typology, what is significant in our view is that this methodology, pioneered by classical Orientalists, laid the groundwork for a novel and unprecedented approach in the history of Qur'anic studies—namely, one that engages directly with the Qur'anic text itself, without relying primarily on the inherited framework of the Islamic Qur'anic sciences tradition (*'ulūm al-Qur'ān*).

However, what has been stated above does not preclude the possibility of benefiting from contemporary efforts—whether by professional historians or scholars of Qur’anic studies—that have sought to situate the Qur’an within its historical context, namely that of *Late Antiquity*. One such example is the work of Tunisian historian Hichem Djaït, who adopted a historical and social anthropological approach in delineating the contours of the early Muslim community (*Majtama’ al-Da’wa*). His primary source in this endeavor was the Qur’an itself, supplemented by traditional Islamic sources—such as the *sīrah* literature, historical chronicles, biographical dictionaries (*ṭabaqāt*), and early Arabic poetry.

In this regard, Djaït writes:

“The anthropological method, when applied to the past—that is, in a historical mode—brings into focus the concept of culture as a general structure centered on vital institutions deeply embedded in society. Religion itself is one of the most significant of these institutions. This cultural lens illuminates the formative, prophetic phase of Islam, just as Islam itself illuminates the surrounding culture. Muhammad was necessarily a product of his environment... Anthropology, as an aid to historical understanding, is not meant merely to identify which pre-Islamic institutions the Qur’an confirmed or abrogated—that is only a secondary concern. Its main purpose is to answer the following question: Why Muhammad? And why in that time and place? What was Quraysh in the early seventh century CE that it could give rise to Muhammad and that select group of his companions? And how did Muhammad generate a religion that was initially rejected by his native environment but quickly became an Arab, then a global, faith—giving rise to an empire and a civilization in its wake?” (Djaït, 2007)

This perspective illustrates how modern historical and anthropological methods can offer valuable insights into the Qur’an’s historical situatedness, while critically engaging with, but not relying solely upon, the inherited interpretive tradition.

Based on the foregoing, Hichem Djaït was able to undertake a thorough study of several key themes that reveal the contours, characteristics, concerns, and components of the early Muslim community (*Majtama’ al-Da’wa*). Among the most significant of these themes are: “kinship relations,” “the origins of paganism,” “the status of women,” “everyday life,” “the social backgrounds of the believers,” and “the social identity of the disbelievers.” From this perspective, it becomes possible for contemporary scholars to draw comparisons between what is conveyed in the narratives of *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation) regarding the early Muslim community and the anthropological analyses conducted on that same community. It is no longer acceptable to rely exclusively on *asbāb al-nuzūl* for studying the historical and social context of Qur’anic revelation. Rather, these reports should be regarded as one of several interpretive tools employed by exegetes to guide or constrain Qur’anic interpretation—often in support of a particular reading or in rejection of an alternative (Jemal, 2005).

In this sense, the classical scholars’ view of *asbāb al-nuzūl* as a “prerequisite” for Qur’anic exegesis or an “entry point” into understanding the text should be understood as part of a larger hermeneutical strategy, not as an independent historical record.

Indeed, it is a striking paradox that the study of the *asbāb al-nuzūl*—the occasions of Qur’anic revelation—has traditionally been conducted following the sequence of *recitation* rather than the *chronological order of revelation*. As previously mentioned, this methodological approach has hindered our understanding of the historical development of the Qur’anic message: its emergence, evolution, and eventual consolidation. The commonly held notion that the Qur’an was revealed progressively (*munajjaman*) over a span of approximately 23 years points to a dialectical relationship between revelation and history—that is, between the Qur’an and the community of the Prophet (the *Majtama’ al-Da’wa*) in particular.

If it is the case that we know the reasons for the revelation of only about one-tenth of the Qur’anic verses, then it logically follows that the remaining nine-tenths, even though no specific reports were transmitted about their historical causes, must also have been associated with particular historical contexts. These contexts may be reconstructed—partially or even substantially—either through close textual analysis of the verses themselves or by consulting the broader body of historical material preserved in the Islamic tradition (e.g., *sīrah*, *tafsīr*, *hadīth*, *akhbār*), which may contain valuable insights.

Moreover, contemporary Qur’anic scholarship increasingly tends to situate the Qur’an within a broader historical and cultural framework known as *Late Antiquity*. This expanded context opens the door to engaging with non-Islamic sources—Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, and others—that either coexisted with the Qur’anic emergence or were composed shortly thereafter. Such comparative and interdisciplinary approaches enrich our understanding of the Qur’an’s formation and its historical setting beyond the boundaries of traditional Islamic scholarship.

## CONCLUSION:

A portion of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports (occasions of revelation) proves useful in providing significant insights into the Community of the Call (*Majtama’ al-Da’wa*), particularly regarding its social relations, prevailing values, responses to the proclamation of the new religion, Qur’anic themes, modes of thought and mentality, religious and social representations, and manifestations of religiosity and ritual practice. Such data can enhance our understanding of Qur’anic utterances by linking them to their historical backgrounds—whether occurring or assumed to have occurred within a historical context.

However, another portion of these reports appears to be disconnected from the early community of the Prophet. It is likely that these narratives were produced in later contexts, beginning with the generation of the Successors (*al-*

tābi'ūn), spanning the late 1st and early 2nd centuries AH. This phenomenon, in our view, is not necessarily a matter of deliberate fabrication; rather, it reflects the subsequent generations' need to access the historical context of the Qur'anic revelation and the circumstances surrounding the descent of the divine message.

To move beyond the binary framework of "connection" and "disconnection" upon which this study is constructed, we propose a focus on the textual context of the Qur'an itself (Martin, 1982). Such an approach avoids methodological and epistemological pitfalls—chief among them, historical anachronism or retrospective projection—as previously discussed. Furthermore, we advocate situating the Qur'an within the broader historical framework of Late Antiquity, a period characterized by distinct religious concerns and thematic currents. We have emphasized that the Qur'an was transmitted entirely within an oral culture, and that the method by which it was later compiled and written—organized according to recitational sequence rather than chronological revelation—ultimately effaced the historical timeline of the divine message.

This reality necessitated reliance on external sources to reconstruct the context of revelation, a body of knowledge that would later form the core of the discipline of *asbāb al-nuzūl*. While this material has undoubtedly proven beneficial to exegetes and scholars of the Qur'an in their pursuit of understanding Qur'anic meaning, we must stress that any reliance on knowledge external to the Qur'anic text will inevitably influence the hermeneutical direction of interpretation. It may even lead to the imposition of a singular interpretive framework, thereby excluding alternative exegetical possibilities.

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