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The People of the Book: A Qur'anic Perspective

Mohammad Ali Shomali¹

The notion of “the people of the Book” (*ahl al-Kitāb*) is a familiar one to those involved in Islamic studies in general and Islamic understanding of other religions in particular. However, there still seems to be a need for further research. In this article, I refer to one aspect of the Qur'anic notion of “the people of the Book,” which I think is actually one of its most fundamental aspects. To do so, I also try to refer to the general framework that the Qur'an gives us about religions and then see how “the people of the Book” fits into that framework.

In Arabic, “*kitāb*” is something which can be written. It does not necessarily mean that this has already been written, though most of the time it is used for something that has been written down or printed. For example, when we say God has given a book to a prophet, it does not necessarily mean that from the beginning the message was given in a book format. For the Qur'an, we have different names, such as “*kitāb*” (something that can be written and therefore read), “*hadith*” and “*qawl*” (speech). So it is a speech and word that can be written and can be read. This is the general meaning of the term *kitāb*.

In the Qur'an, “the book” is sometimes used to refer to the Qur'an itself. For example, the Qur'an says, “This is the Book. There is no doubt in it, a guidance to the God wary.”² But sometimes it is used to refer to any divine book, such as Torah, Gospel, and Psalms. It is in this sense that the combination of words *ahl al-Kitāb*, the people of the Book, is used. For example, in a very famous verse that we use for showing how interfaith dialogue is rooted in the Qur'an, God says, “Tell O the people of the book! Come towards the common word and that is not to associate any partner for God. We only serve God.”³

So *the people of the Book* is a general title for all who believe in and follow a divinely revealed book, a characteristic that is common to Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Sabians. It seems that it also includes Muslims themselves. This is an idea that I have had for some time, and I recently came across a paper by a renowned contemporary Shi'a scholar, Allamah Mohammad Taqi Ja'fari, in which he too applied *the people of the Book* to Muslims as well. Thus, whether *the people of the Book* is used to refer to the people who believe in revelations other than the Qur'an or to all who believe in and follow any divine revelation needs to be discovered from the context.

Here I try to explain my understanding of the overall concepts of “the Book” and “the Religion” in Islam according to the Qur'an, which is the most important source for all Muslims. We normally look at religions through what we have learned from books on the history of religions and theology, which from childhood have formed our mind and understanding as if we are dealing with very separate worlds. There is a religion called

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² Qur'an 2:2

³ Qur'an 3:64

“Judaism.” There is a second religion called “Christianity.” Yes, there is a third religion called “Islam.” We often deal with these religions as if they are three different things. Even when it comes to different traditions and denominations inside each, we sometimes think that these are totally different things and that it is impossible to cross or connect one world to the other. This seems to be the way our mind is set, and this view appears to have affected the minds of some of those who have tried to understand the Qur’anic view of religion/s. Here I would like to invite you to take a journey into the Qur’an and see how the Qur’an presents this reality for us. Has God sent one religion or many religions?

The Qur’an makes it clear in many ways that God has designed only one religion, and that this one religion has been introduced and then reintroduced and re-presented again and again by different prophets and messengers. There is only one divine religion, and no prophet or messenger is the founder of this religion. The prophets and messengers just delivered the message of God to people. You do not find any reference in the Qur’an to Prophet Mohammad or Jesus or Moses or Abraham ever saying that they had brought or founded a new religion. There is only one religion and one founder.

In verse 16:36, the Qur’an says, “We have sent messengers to all nations to serve God and not to follow the devil.” There is no nation in the world to which no messenger was sent. This doesn’t imply that messengers were sent in every generation to every nation, but at least to every nation a messenger was sent.⁴ So all the messengers took this message to all corners of the world: follow, serve, and dedicate yourself to God, the absolute goodness, the absolute truth, the absolute beauty, the absolute love, and the absolute mercy. Or, for example, the Qur’an says, “Did I not exhort you, O children of Adam, saying, ‘Do not worship Satan. He is indeed your manifest enemy. Worship Me. That is a straight path?’”⁵ The covenant here is the same as the core message of all messengers as we saw in verse 16:36.

There is a verse in the Qur’an that has been much discussed by exegetes and theologians, though I think if we approach the verse from the proper perspective, it is actually very clear. In verse 2:213, the Qur’an informs us that there was a time when human beings were united as one single nation, and therefore they were not in need of any sophisticated or comprehensive code of law. They lived together peacefully. They did not have conflicts. Unfortunately, when their number increased and their social life became a little bit more complicated, some of them started taking advantage and tried to treat others unjustly. So in addition to general revelation, which had been coming from the beginning of the history of humanity, God started sending codes of law (*shari’ah; shar’*).

According to Allamah Tabatabaei in *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur’an*, the first messenger who brought a system of law was Noah. Before Noah there were instructions but not a system or code of law. Thus, human beings were united. Then they started coming into conflict. They were in need of some instructions. Therefore, prophets came. They brought them books. They brought them guidance. They brought them instructions.

⁴ It should be noted that according to Islamic hadiths (narrations), there have been 124,000 prophets (*nabiy*). Out of them there were 313 messengers (*rasūl*). These are the people to whom God gave a message to deliver, but the rest of the prophets preached the message given to the messengers. Out of the 313, five stand at the top and are called “the people of determination” (*ulu al-‘azm*): Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Prophet Mohammad.

⁵ Qur’an 36:60–61. Please see also verse 98:5 where upright religion is introduced as committing ourselves to God and in particular prayer and giving charity, two pillars of commitment and devotion to God. Commitment and devotion to God need to be demonstrated by prayer and by bringing good to this world through charity.

What happened? Prophets managed to bring people together, but soon people started disagreeing on the same message. So we see a repetitive pattern. There was a division before the prophets came and then division developed after the prophets came. Messengers brought unity; then after them divisions took place and sometimes some people even fought over what that unifying message was, which is sad and absurd.

One of the important points in this verse is that God sent the prophets with the “Book” (*al-Kitab*) and not the “Books” (*al-Kutub*). This indicates that God has not sent different books. God has sent only one book, but as different editions. This is like compiling an encyclopedia. You do not keep compiling it again and again. You just reprint it or, if needed, you bring forth a new edition of it. Details can be different, but the content in essence the same.

In several places, the Qur’an says that the prophets brought clear signs (*al-bayyinat*), scriptures, and the illuminating book (*al-kitab al-munir*).⁶ Again the Qur’an refers to one book, though previous words – the messengers, *al-bayyinat*, and *al-zubur* – are all plural.

It should be noted that the Qur’an also sometimes uses the plural form to refer to the divine scriptures and books. For example, God says that Lady Mary confirmed words of her Lord and His books.⁷ Likewise the Qur’an says that the believers believe God, His angels, His books, and His messengers.⁸ So a question arises about how to put together the verses that refer to one book and those that refer to numerous books.

If you reflect on those verses where the Qur’an talks about the books, you will notice that they relate to people and what they have before them, but those verses that refer to one book refer to what has been sent down by God. God sent one book, but what is in people’s hands is several books, just as God has sent one religion but what is among us is different religions. What is the conclusion? The answer is clear. God has only sent one book, but what we have among us are Torah, Gospel, Psalms, and the Qur’an. We have different presentations among us. We have to believe in these books. We have to conform to them. We have to accept the truth which is in them, but at the same time we should know that God has sent one book.

It should also be noted that even this book that has been given to us in different editions itself originated from a hidden book. The Qur’an says: “Truly it is an honourable book, which is in a hidden book.”⁹

When it comes to religion, it is the same. There is one religion: this was the message of all the messengers. And it is very interesting that when the Qur’an talks about religions, it uses the expression “religion of the truth [or Truth]” and not “the true religion.” A well-known verse in the Qur’an that deals with the End of Time answers questions such as: What will be the situation of religions in the End of Time? Which religion, if any, is still going to be there, and which one is going to be dominant? The verse reads as follows: “He is the one who sent His messenger with guidance and religion of the truth [*din al-haqq*] in order to make it dominant over all religion, even if the polytheists may dislike this.”¹⁰

⁶ For example, in Qur’an 35:25.

⁷ Qur’an 66:12.

⁸ Qur’an 2:285.

⁹ Qur’an 56:78.

¹⁰ Qur’an 9:32.

Some or perhaps most exegetes hold that “*din al-haqq*” refers to Islam in its narrower sense and that Islam is going to be the dominant religion. However, it seems that the verse is talking about “religion of the truth” in contrast to “religion of falsehood.” Religion of the truth or complete truthfulness will be dominant. People’s hearts will be prepared for accepting the truth. Opposite to the religion of the truth is the religion of falsehood. Opposite to the religion of the truth is serving our ego and going after false Gods. Again we see there is one reality and that is the religion of the truth.

The Qur’an also talks about seeking the “face of God.” an expression that we find in the Bible as well. Neither Christians nor Muslims think of the “face of God” as a physical face. What does then the “face of God” mean? In my understanding, we can have maximum encounter with something by turning to one particular aspect or dimension of it. If I want to have maximum encounter with a human being, I should have a face-to face encounter. But if there is something that does not have understanding, like a flower, then just turning my face towards it or its main part might be enough.

When it comes to God, how can we have encounter with God? Is there any place that we should go so that we can have encounter with God? Is God in the temple, or mosque, or church? Is God in holy lands only? Where is God? We see some people go to the holy places and still they might be far away from God. Going to a place can help, but it does not guarantee that we will be mindful of God. And being physically far from holy places or places of worship does not mean that one is far from God. How can we have encounter with God? The Qur’an says wherever you turn, the face of God is there.¹¹ You have to turn yourself to the face of God. You do not need to look for God. Open your heart to God. God is everywhere.

So this is the concept of “face” (*wajh*). Then in many places the Qur’an says that the whole idea of faith is to submit your face to God. For example, the Qur’an says, “Who is better in his religion than the one who submits his face to God and is a benefactor and follows the tradition of Abraham and God chose Abraham as His friend?”¹² To be faithful one does not need to do wonders. It is just a decision of mind and heart together that we submit our face to God and then we do good things. We cannot submit ourselves to God and do bad things. Anyone who does bad things has not turned towards God. Whatever your religion is and no matter how you interpret your scripture, the test for your faithfulness is that you should be *muhsin* (a benefactor). No one can say killing innocent people or causing war or terrorism is an act of *ihsan* (benefaction). It is impossible to really turn towards God and then fail to project light, love, and mercy to people and try to make this world a better place for others.

Thus, the Qur’an asks: who is better in religion than those who submit their face to God and do good and follow the path of Abraham? This is the path of Abraham. We are not given a new religion after Abraham. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are not new religions after Abraham. We are followers of the same tradition. Even Abraham himself didn’t make a new religion. Abraham himself was a follower of Noah. The Qur’an says, “Indeed Abraham was among his followers.”¹³

Thus, there has been only one line of prophecy. All the prophets proclaimed the same message, though the details might have varied. No prophet founded his own message or religion. Anyone who really believes in God, the One, should be able to see how unity of God

¹¹ Qur’an 2:115.

¹² Qur’an 4:125.

¹³ Qur’an 37:83.

has manifested itself in both His creation and revelations. We should have no doubt that God wants us to be united. The Qur'an informs us that it was an act of Pharaoh to divide people.¹⁴ On the other hand, God considers uniting people a divine act: "Remember the blessing of God when you were enemies and God brought your hearts close to each other."¹⁵

In conclusion, the Qur'anic concept of book has to be understood in the light of God's whole plan for human salvation, for guidance. And that is to help humanity with understanding one message, and that is dedication to the absolute truth. This was repeatedly emphasized by different prophets and messengers, and the way towards it was shown to humanity through different scriptures. According to the Qur'an, these scriptures are different editions of the same book. Moreover, they originate from the source, "the hidden book."

¹⁴ Qur'an 28:4.

¹⁵ Qur'an 3:103.