

The Satanic Verses

Few books have had the publicity that surrounds *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie. This brief article seeks to provide some background material for the book's title and for reasons why even the title might disturb Muslims.

Islam strongly opposes idolatry, polytheism, associating anything or anyone with God. In fact, Islam's creed in Arabic begins with a negative: *Not* is there a god except God. It contrasts sharply with the contention of Muhammad's Arab contemporaries that God had associates. Some of these associates are even mentioned in the Qur'an, among them three female deities: al-Lat, al-Uzza and Manat. Each had a shrine in separate places not far from Mecca in Arabia, where Muhammad was born and began his mission. They were even considered to be daughters of God!

The Qur'an, as it now reads, obviously rejects these deities. But—and here comes the issue—did the Qur'an and Muhammad always reject them?

While Muhammad was in Mecca, his followers were few, his movement grew painfully slowly and he, too, felt the pain of estrangement from his tribe. According to early and treasured biographical and historical accounts of Muhammad, authored by competent Muslim scholars (such as writings of at-Tabari and Ibn Sa'd), Muhammad longed for better relations and reconciliation with his community. Thereafter, the accounts continue, God revealed Surah 53 to Muhammad up to and including vss. 19, 20. These two verses read:

Have ye thought upon al-Lat and al-Uzza
And Manat, the third, the other? (53:19,20)

Then, originally, the verses (known today as the satanic verses) followed:

These are the exalted cranes (intermediaries)
Whose intercession is to be hoped for.

The cranes whose intercession was recognized were, of course, the three deities. The same accounts tell us that after this revelation was completed, Muhammad, his followers and the pagan Arabs all prostrated. Tensions eased, reconciliation was at hand, and all were delighted.

But Muhammad soon retracted the reconciliation—how soon is not clear. For the account continues that Jibril (Gabriel), the angel of revelation, informed Muhammad that Satan had used Muhammad's desire for reconciliation with the pagan leaders to insert into the revelation of God the verses about the interceding cranes, otherwise called "the satanic verses". The verses which follow, not the satanic verses, serve as the proper sequence to 53:19,20 (above):

Are yours the males and His the females?
That indeed were an unfair division! (53:21,22)

In other words: When you Arabs have sons (whom you prefer to daughters!), how unfair of you to say that God has daughters! The idea of a plurality of gods or goddesses or sons or daughters of God is ridiculous. God alone is God. The three goddesses are false.

Two other passages from the Qur'an are considered to have reference to the compromise between Muhammad and the Arabs, and Muhammad's eventual rejection of it. The first reads:

And they indeed strove to beguile thee (Muhammad) away from that wherewith We (God) have inspired thee, that thou shouldst invent other than it against Us; and then would they have accepted thee as a friend. And if We had not made thee wholly firm thou mightest almost have inclined unto them a little. Then had We made thee taste a double (punishment) of living and a double (punishment) of dying, then hadst thou found no helper against Us. (17:73-75)

The second passage is intended to comfort Muhammad:

Never sent We a messenger or a prophet before thee but when He recited (the message) Satan proposed (opposition) in respect of that which he recited thereof. But Allah abolisheth that which Satan proposeth. Then Allah establisheth His revelations. Allah is Knower, Wise; That He may make that which the devil proposeth a temptation for those in whose hearts is a disease, and those whose hearts are hardened –Lo! the evil-doers are in open schism. (22:52,53)

On the basis of these verses especially, the designation "The Satanic Verses" arises.

It is not our intention here to defend Rushdie and his book. On the other hand, it is clear that Rushdie did not invent the satanic verses. Moreover, it would seem that Muslims of earlier generations were content to accept that satanic verses could somehow be insinuated into a prophet's message from God, even into the Qur'an, that God could abolish the satanic verses, and that, as the following passage suggests, God could replace even a verse of His own revelation with a similar or better verse of His own:

Such of Our revelations as We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, We bring (in place) one better or the like thereof. Knowest thou not that Allah is Able to do all things? (2:106 cf. 16:101)

In fact, Islamic theologians of earlier ages carefully sorted out which Quranic passages were abrogating and which were abrogated.

Today, many Muslims deny that God could abrogate or change His Word in any way or form. Ironically, they sometimes interpret Qur'an 2:106 (above) to mean that the Qur'an has abrogated the previous Scriptures of Moses and Jesus—despite the fact that the Qur'an clearly attests that these Scriptures also are the Word of God and therefore, presumably, unchangeable! How much more odious, then, to suggest that at least for a period of time satanic verses actually formed a part of the Qur'an! For many Muslims it is simply inconceivable that Muhammad, even under the severest pressures, would (perhaps even could) compromise with his Meccan enemies, and still more that Satan somehow could "whisper" his thoughts into the substance of God's holy Word, the Qur'an. That is why even the idea of satanic verses in the Qur'an shocks some Muslims.

But, to repeat, Rushdie did not originate the satanic verses. Nor did Jews, Christians or other non-Muslims. Our information about the satanic verses and the circumstances surrounding their revelation stems from the reputable Muslim accounts of at-Tabari and Ibn Sa'd. Muslims today who simply dismiss the account of these writers as fabricated and unhistorical must at least answer the question why such reputable persons would report it. The question is not new. But, it seems, a serious Muslim response is hard to find.

(This article, originally written in 1989 and here slightly edited, draws freely from 1. A Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, Oxford, a translation of Ibn Hisham's early Arabic biography of Muhammad; 2. W. M. Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, Oxford, 1953, pp.101-109. Reference to the topic is also found in a recently published biography of Muhammad by the Iranian Ali Dashti, *Twenty-Three Years*, translated from Persian by F. R. C. Bagley. Quranic quotations come from M. Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*. I found no reference to the satanic verses in Yusuf Ali's popular Quranic commentary! For a better-researched and more detailed presentation on this topic, please refer to Silas,

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Response to "Those High Flying Claims"

Dr. Ernest Hahn

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To: Islamic Awareness, Messrs. M S M Saifullah, Qasim Iqbal, Jason Hannan, Mansur Ahmed & Muhammad Ghoniem

Thank you for [your reply](#) to my essay "[The Satanic Verses](#)".

By way of response, kindly consider the following:

While I accept your clarification with respect to sources vs. transmitters of the so-called Satanic verses, I should add that I did not intend "sources" to mean that Ibn Sa'd and at-Tabari originated these accounts. Nor have I intended to claim that these accounts are purely historical.

To say, however, that Tabari rejects accountability for his accounts does not necessarily imply that he has no opinion about the truth or falseness of these accounts. Given the fact of the vast number of false traditions which came into circulation (so the account about Bukhari distinguishing between true and false traditions about Muhammad), it seems difficult to think that Tabari transmitted all that he heard uncritically.

Does discussing who coined the term "Satanic verses" and attributing it to "the belligerent Sir William Muir" really contribute helpfully to the discussion? If the term is theatrical, is it not theatrical simply as a derivative of the dramatic accounts found in Tabari, etc.?

If you have not seen [Silas' response](#) to your reply to my essay, may I commend it to you? I am deeply grateful to him for his argumentation. He has made my task considerably easier!

With reference to your conclusion: "The fact that al-Tabari, Ibn Sa'd and others have recorded this story in their works does not prove that the story itself is true': If this statement is true, it seems to me that it is just as true or even more so after reading Silas' essay that their records do not prove that the story itself is not true. For further comment see Shabbir Akhtar, **A Faith for All Seasons**, Bellew Publishing, London, 1990, p. 59: "Indeed, the potentially damaging incident of 'The Satanic Verses' (K:53:19-23), recorded in detail by a scrupulously honest Muslim tradition, had demonstrated the possibility that the Devil could interfere with Muhammad's reception of the sacred text."

As for the challenge you have me making to Muslims: fair enough, it is a challenge. But surely you, too, can see it also as only a challenge to the far grander challenge which some Muslims constantly pose before the world, non-Muslims and Muslims, i.e., presenting Muhammad as the uniquely perfect human and the Qur'an as God's unique Scriptures, inimitable, perfectly preserved, the Word of God, even the eternal Word of God. Surely such exalted claims invite, perhaps even demand, a response.

My own elementary response, based on biographical and historical materials authored by Muslims and respected by other Muslims, was to provide only one illustration of the type of problems which may arise even out of the honoured writings of honoured Muslim authors against such claims made for Muhammad and the Qur'an. (Would you agree such problems exist?) In my opinion your rebuttal ("Those Are the High Flying Claims") has not solved the problem of the Satanic Verses; in fact, Silas' essay has

accentuated the problem and contributed greatly to the probability that the story is rooted in history. I would welcome seeing your reasoned response to him.

Finally, a little postscript: Do we accept the assumption that our conversation is intentional dialogue? I hope that I am not overly sensitive and unfair in suggesting that especially the last part of your conclusion was more diatribe than rational argument. Does this approach accord with your kind greeting of peace? Do you feel that such an approach somehow edifies Islam and that it honours God? I am serious when I say I would appreciate an Islamic justification for it.

God's peace be with you!

Ernest Hahn

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