

Inspiration or Transmission - How can we characterize the revelations of Qur'an?

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Abstract: This paper analyses the material evidences mentioned in the historical sources related to the appearance of 'Revelations of Qur'an'. The records contain reports that describe extreme pain experienced by the Messenger during the phenomenon; a low volume high frequency hum that could be heard close to his head; and presence of sudden and temporary increase in his weight during this unusual activity. Moreover, an incident of a surgery in his childhood, and appearance of a small protuberance later on his back, are also included in the reports. The Messenger is reported to have refused to get the protuberance operated, citing its connection with the phenomenon. Interpreting all these reports in the light of modern findings, together with some internal mentions in the Qur'an, an explanation, consistent with all evidences has been offered, which presents the phenomenon as a physical 'transmission' from a Non-human Source.

Key Words: Qur'an; Muhammad; Allah; God; Monotheism; Revelations; Revealed Knowledge; God Communication; Bible; Prophets; Messengers of God; extra-terrestrial transmission; inspiration; Holy Spirit.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The revelations among monotheistic religions have been defined traditionally as the knowledge revealed by God. The word used for inspiration in the Bible is *theopneustos*, which means "God-breathed". It implies that what was written had its origin in God Himself. However, how this breathing was done has never been ascertained clearly. The Bible is known to be a compilation of 66 books, written by more than 40 authors over a period of 1,500 years. How God had inspired these writers down the ages is unknown.

Judeo-Christian scholars do not classify the revealed knowledge in the category of inspiration felt by the authors of human literary masterpieces nor they believe this experience to be similar to the occasional impulsesⁱⁱ of 'inspiration' admitted by several well-known scientists. The biblical text is accepted more as a human record of God's activity in history than as a direct verbal revelation to the prophets. The role of the prophets is mainly understood as one of witnesses and interpreters of God's Willⁱⁱⁱ. A popular expression in this regard is "The Word of God in the words of men". These scholars believe that God had utilized the culture and conventions of his penmen's milieu to reveal His Guidance, a milieu that God controls in His sovereign providence.

With Islam, the religion of about 1.9 billion people on the planet, the case is different. Prophet Muhammad is not only accepted as the witness and interpreter of God's Will, he is also acknowledged by Muslim scholars as the final recipient of a direct verbal revelation from God. This alleged transmission, the declaration of the Divine Will, is known as the Qur'an or simply *Al-Risala* - the Message. Muslims have been very careful from earliest times, to keep the Prophet's sayings, his companions' comments, and Islamic history, distinct and separate from these alleged 'Words of God'.

It is this absolute belief of Muslims in a direct transmission of revelations from God that non-Muslim scholars find wholly unacceptable. They claim that transmission of an alphabet-by-alphabet 'message' to a 'human' from God is a virtual impossibility. Any idea, however lofty, when presented in a human language, needs to pass through the human lens, thus suffering distortion. At the most, such a set of writings can be called inspired literature, but nothing more.

The debate, thus, which began more than a millennium ago, is still going on. Muslims believe that the Qur'an or 'The Message' is the ultimate source of revealed knowledge for the guidance of man, while non-Muslims believe that it is just an assemblage of addresses by a man of the desert from a bygone era. They also assert that these addresses have now become outdated and unsuitable for a world that has advanced by one-and-a-half millennia of age.

Can modern science help us to resolve this issue? The answer is yes. A collective organized investigation of contents of the Message, and the investigation of historical records for material evidences related to the phenomenon, can tilt the debate. The primary focus of this paper is on the investigation of

historical records that tell us how the revelations were first received and communicated to his companions by Muhammad (PBUH).

II. WHAT DO THE HISTORICAL RECORDS TELL US ABOUT THE PHENOMENON?

Several reports exist in ancient manuscripts, which throw a unique light on the human lens debate, especially if studied against the backdrop of present knowledge. Each such report has come to us through multiple sources, corroborating its authenticity; and can be divided into separate categories.

Extreme pain in the transmission of revelations

Numerous reports exist that relate to the physical changes that occurred in the Prophet's condition during the time he received the phenomenon of revelations. It is reported that he himself expressed having feelings of extreme distress, intense pain, a heightened sense of perception, and hearing a ringing sound^{iv} during the phenomenon. His close companions reported that during these experiences, his head would suddenly droop, his face acquire a pallor, and drops of perspiration would appear, even during winters^v. None of the reports however, mention either a loss of consciousness or a drift from reality.

For Muslim scholars, the 'pain' accompanying this process became an enigma that was hard to explain. The Qur'an rejects the notion of *unnecessary* suffering as being an essential requirement for spiritual development, although it *encourages* an all-out effort on the right path. No one thus could account for the reason why the Messenger had to suffer during this process. It was probably because of a lack of rational reason that the pain, along with the perspiration and pallor, never became an issue of discussion in later years.

The ringing sound, on the other hand, did invite some attempts at explanation. Some described it as the sound generated by the flapping of angels' wings, while others suggested that the description was an allegory for the voice of revelations that did not have a particular direction or interruption breaks^{vi}. But, the multiple explanations themselves showed that no one had an authentic explanation regarding it..

My own suggestion as a researcher is that the pain and the ringing sound which are invariably considered by Muslim scholars as independent factors, seem related to each other. The ringing in the ears is known medically as tinnitus. It has several causative factors. According to experts, "any blockage to the vascular system will cause the nerves along the auditory canal to malfunction, giving rise to abnormal sound signals in the ears which are subsequently transmitted to the brain. Uneven blood flow through the arteries is another cause for weird sounds in the ears."^{vii} The uneven blood flow also results in ischaemia, causing pain, discomfort, and other symptoms like pallor, sweating and nausea, etcetera. The blood pressure and pulse could not have been measured in that era, but the rest of the symptoms mentioned - pallor, sweating, nausea and ringing in the ear, collectively suggest that something was causing a change in the blood flow, making the experience extremely distressful to the human channel. The Prophet's own assertion that "this mode of *wahi* (revelations) was very difficult for him" corroborates it. Moreover, these symptoms appeared *only during the phenomenon*, and not at any other time. Therefore, the explanation of tinnitus and all its allied symptoms had to have its origin outside of any physiological problems of the Prophet.

A low-volume, high-frequency hum

Another important evidence, which is mostly ignored by Muslim scholars, exists in the ancient manuscripts related to this phenomenon. This evidence is reported on the authority of Umar Bin Khattab, who later became the second Caliph. This highly credible report is about the existence of a "low-volume, high-frequencies hum" that could only be heard very close to the head of the Prophet during the actual phenomenon^{viii}. No one till date has offered any explanation for this sound, which has been described in the ancient records as resembling the "humming of bees." If this sound is considered as an objective tinnitus, its origin or cause will still remain mysterious, as it appeared only during the phenomenon. It should also be remembered that objective tinnitus is extremely rare and is linked with a vascular or neuromuscular condition within the head, neck, or brain. The sound reported in the Prophet's tradition (humming of bees) is also different from the 'whooshing' sound that results in such rare cases due to blockage or restriction in the arteries of the suggested areas.

Evidence of virtual mass during the phenomenon

The reports also mention another strange and mysterious factor associated with the revelations: a very obvious, but temporary, increase in the body weight of the human channel (Prophet Muhammad) during the phenomenon. It was so pronounced that it reportedly forced even his camel to sit down under the suddenly unbearable weight^{ix}.

It is obvious that within a reasonable passage of time, a man can acquire or shed weight, depending upon food and his habits, but a sudden substantial gain within a matter of few minutes, and then reversion to the

same weight, is not possible, unless of course he leaves the earth and goes beyond the effects of its gravitational strength.

Einstein's Special theory of Relativity [1905]^x does allow a temporary or virtual increase in mass, if massive energy is involved in a phenomenon, but relative movement between observer and the observed is a basic postulate of the theory, which is not *apparent* in this case.

So what could be the explanation?

The simple answer is that no one has any explanation for it. Any explanation forwarded at this point of time will only remain in the realm of speculation. However, if a hint in a verse in the Qur'an is considered, it does seem to point towards the involvement of very high energy during the transmission of the revelations.

"Had We sent down this Qur'an on a mountain, Verily thou wouldst have seen it humble itself and cleave asunder for fear of Allah. Such are the similitude, which We propound to men, that they may reflect" (Surat Al-Hashr 59:21).^{xi}

How did the human frame countered the pressure of extra weight (mentioned in the Traditions) or the sudden onslaught of tremendous energy (mentioned in the Qur'an)?

The enigma of the Prophet's increase in weight during revelations, raises some additional queries that Muslim scholars have not dealt with. Several reports tell us that if the Prophet happened to be riding a camel during the onset of the phenomenon, the animal invariably was unable to remain standing, and sat down under the sudden increase of his weight. It is also reported on the authority of Zaid IbnHaritha^{xii}, a close companion, that once the phenomenon of revelations began while Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had lain down for a short rest. It so happened that Zaid who was popularly called his son, had offered his thighs a pillow to support the Prophet's head. Zaid says that suddenly he felt such an enormous crushing weight of Prophet's head that he thought he would never be able to walk again. Mercifully for him, the period of the transmission lasted for only a short duration, as it usually did.

From these and other such reports, arises the logical query of how the Prophet's body was able to support this sudden crushing pressure, when he received revelations while in an upright position? No scholars down the ages have discussed questions like, where exactly was the pressure concentrated? Was the weight or pressure distributed through his entire body or was his head or rather brain the specific target? In a normal human body, the neck muscles, slender vertebral column and the entire skeletal frame would all be tremendously affected if such a pressure were applied suddenly.

So, was the Prophet's frame strengthened and reinforced in some mysterious way? Unfortunately, we cannot know the exact location of the pressure on his body, but as far as the vertebral support is concerned, there is another piece of evidence that is relevant to this mystery.

Evidence of an operation

It is the Qur'an itself which provides a pointer about this mystery in *SuratAl-Inshirah*. The word *Inshirah* means solace, consolation, and relief. Yusuf Ali's translation of all the nine verses of this *surat* is as follows -

Have We not expanded thee thy breast? [Al-Inshirah 94:1]

And removed from thee thy burden? [Al-Inshirah 94:2]

The which did gall thy back? [Al-Inshirah 94:3]

And raised high the esteem (in which) thou (art held) [Al-Inshirah 94:4]

So, verily with every difficulty, there is relief: [Al-Inshirah 94:5]

Verily with every difficulty, there is relief. [Al-Inshirah 94:6]

Therefore when thou art free, still labor hard [Al-Inshirah 94:7]

And to thy Lord turn thy attention. [Al-Inshirah 94:8]

In the original Arabic of the first verse, *Alam nashrah laka sadraka*, two words have been used, *شَرَحsharh* and *sadr* صدر. The word *sharh* has been translated as "expanded" here, but it literally means to "open up." Lane has quoted '*The Sihah*' and '*The Obab of Es-Saghanee*' to explain its meanings as 'He uncovered, laid open, exposed to view etc. The word, in fact, is regularly used for surgical operations. The second word, *sadr*, on the other hand, means a central part, popularly understood as the chest. In the second verse - *WawadaAAana AAanka wizraka*, translated as 'And removed from thee thy burden' - the word *wada* وضع means - to put down, abate or degrade, and *wizr* ويزر means load, pressure or burden [Steingass]. Literally translated, the first two verses seem to point towards an act of surgical opening of the prophet's chest for the purpose of reducing (not removing completely) a load or pressure on him. The third verse then tells us about the damaging effect of this pressure – "The which did gall thy back," which in Arabic is *Allathee anqada thahraka*. The verb *naqd* نقذ means to quash, abolish, counter; and *thahra* ظهرك represents "rear or backside along the spine" (Al-Mawrid). The combination of the words suggests that the pressure would have squashed the back. The fifth and sixth verses go on to repeat an identical message. The words "with every difficulty, there is relief" seem to

suggest that after every episode, the difficulty would lessen progressively. “Repetition” in the Arabic language is used to increase the intensity of the communication. Aptly, the records also inform us that the phenomenon of revelations was extremely painful and difficult for the Prophet during the initial stages, but later on, it gradually became easier for him. A different evidence which corroborates this gradual easing of difficulty is indicated by the size of the revelations during each session. Initially, the revelations started with five verses, but later they went on increasing in size with each passing session. Barring a few exceptions, this was more or less a consistent pattern followed over a period of twenty-two years. All the smaller *Surat* placed at the end of the *Qur'an* are known to be early revelations, while larger components of *Surat Baqara*, *Al-Imran* and several others were revealed later.

With reference to this verse, some commentators^{xiii} on the *Qur'an* have suggested that by saying ‘removed from thee thy burden,’ God is referring to the load of problems or errors committed by the Prophet before assuming the mantle of prophet-hood. But these explanations seem inappropriate. Commentators do not cite any historical records about such errors in his pre-prophet-hood days; and this happens to be an early revelation when instead of being relieved, the problems seemingly had just started.

Interestingly, there are several traditions with slight variations in terms of the Prophet’s age and wordings that describe what seems like an operation performed on him during his early childhood by two unknown beings. The oldest exegesis, *Tafsir al Qur'an al Azim* by Ibn Kathir (d.774 A.H.), contains an interesting narrative, quoted here in full.

Ubayy b. Ka'b says Abu Hurayrah was far more bold in asking questions of the Prophet than anyone else of us. One day he asked the Prophet (*saws*):

‘What is it that you first noticed in your life as a sign of Prophet-hood?’ The Prophet sat up and said, ‘You have asked a question, Abu Hurayrah! Well, I was about ten years or so old, in the desert, when I heard someone talking above me. I looked up and saw two men, one saying to the other, ‘Is this he?’ They alighted in front of me. They were different from anyone I had seen before with clothes on that were entirely new to me. They walked up to me and each placed his hand upon one of my shoulders. I can almost feel the coolness of their touch, even now. One said to the other, ‘Lay him down.’ They laid me down without any effort. Then one of them said to the other, ‘Open up his chest.’ That was done without any blood and without any pain. He said, ‘Remove deceit and jealousy.’ The other removed something like a blood clot and threw it away. Then he said, ‘Implant compassion and kindness.’ The other brought out something of the same size (as what they had thrown away) but silver-like. Then he held my right toe in his hand and said, ‘Return. Be as you were.’ In a moment I was all right, running back - compassionate towards the young and kind towards the old”^{xiv}.

Two points are interesting in light of this evidence.

1. A mysterious involvement of ‘two men in white’ is also mentioned in the Book of Acts in association with an extremely important incident in the life of Jesus - his departure from the earth.

After he (Jesus) said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They (disciples of Jesus) were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly *two men dressed in white* stood beside them.

‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven’ [Acts 9, 10 11].^{xv}

The dialogue quoted demonstrates that the “two men in white” were *not* ordinary passersby. They had information about Jesus, which even his companions *did not know*. The ancient records also do not mention anything about where they came from or where they went away after the event.

2. The same mystery exists in the Islamic records, also. The ancient records do not tell us anything extra about these beings in white who had an exceptionally cold touch. Nevertheless, the point which seems logical with reference to this operation, ostensibly by non-humans, is that anything introduced into the Prophet’s body during his childhood for the reinforcement of his skeletal frame or muscles, and its growth gradually along with the body organs, was expected to have a good chance of acceptance and survival, and less likelihood of its being rejected by the body’s defense mechanism.

Such a conjecture also finds corroborative support through a different evidence that appeared in his adult age.

Evidence about a small protuberance

There are a number of reports which exist in the tradition, about the appearance of a small swelling on the back of Muhammad during his adult years^{xvi}. The majority of these traditions cite its size as being like that of a pigeon’s egg, located at a mid-point between the shoulders, close to the neck, while a single report compares it with the back of a fist located at the left shoulder blade. It is also reported that when its removal through a surgical operation was suggested to Muhammad (PBUH), he refused to have it done, citing its connection with revelations. In fact, his companions referred this bulge as the ‘Seal of Prophet-hood.’

We can thus cite three significant factors in this regard - the existence of a *swelling* on his back; the Messenger's *refusal* to have it operated upon and removed; and a clear indication from him about a *relationship* between the swelling and the phenomenon of revelation. Since the bulge is reported to be almost at the top of the vertebral column, where the muscle and the fat layer between the skin and the bone are *thinnest*, it *could have been the visible part of some kind of internal reinforcement that may have extended downwards on his skeletal frame and helped support the extra weight*. It is the only explanation that connects the three factors with the childhood operation, and the mystery regarding how the sudden increase of pressure on the spine was absorbed by Muhammad (PBUH) in an upright position.

Incidentally, no accompanying explanations exist in the historical records about the “swelling” on his back or the Messenger’s refusal for its removal, or its link with the revelations. Moreover, *no scholar has speculated about this connection between the operation and the bulge to date*.

Absence of electromagnetic noise or interference

Two other factors, although speculative in nature and not part of ancient records, are also important in this context. Unlike in the present times, when our earth is enveloped in a sea of electro-magnetic activity, the Qur'anic revelations came at a time when it was an electrically silent planet. In the seventh century, the only possible sources of electromagnetic noise were the sun, stars and the bio-activity of the planet's flora and fauna. Moreover, the revelations descended in a cup-shaped valley within a desert that had sparse life for thousands of miles around. During the night, specifically, even this activity would have reached a minuscule level. Significantly, some verses in the Qur'an [Al-Muzzammil 73:1-6] specifically instruct the Messenger to wake up in the night for a purpose related to the Message.

These records, together with mention of the involvement of high energy in the revelations [Al-Hashr 59:21] and about the preparation of the human Messenger for this transmission from the beginning [Surat Al-Inshirah 1-9], all demonstrate a consistent pattern that has never been discussed before. This pattern can only be explained if the records are interpreted to present ‘Revelations of Qur'an’ as a physical ‘transmission’ from a Non-human Source.

III. A NOTE ABOUT EVALUATION OF THE RECORDS

Apart from conducting investigations into the age and credibility rating of these records, they should also be evaluated with reference to the logical possibility of their being fabricated. For example, what could be the reason for fabrication of a report associating intense “pain and difficulty” with revelations, complete with all the apparent symptoms, and then suggesting no explanation for it during the subsequent centuries? The report about a “high-frequency hum” emanating from the head of the Messenger, in records that are a thousand years older than the birth of electricity or any concept pertaining to energy transmission, would also be a curious piece of fabrication, if at all it is a fabrication. Likewise, the increase in the Prophet's weight only during the time of revelations also contradicts the logic of fabrication. In a man's psyche, the ‘up’ and ‘down’ directions are clearly identified with good and evil, and no follower in his right mind would fabricate a report where the Prophet, in the midst of a spiritual experience, is described as being *pulled downwards*. Logically, a fabricated report would more likely have mentioned him *floating upwards* during this experience, specifically since an angel was also supposed to be involved in the process of revelations.

Moreover, these five sets have not been selected out of hundreds of reports that fit the criteria; *these are the only reports in the records*, and in all such cases, a logical explanation for fabrication would have to be found relevant to the times, otherwise they should be considered as genuine, albeit unexplainable at the moment.

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