

Lesson 7: The Science of the Context of the Revelation (Asbabu-Nozoul)

One of the very useful sciences of the Qur'an which immensely helps the interpreters of the Qur'an is the 'science of the context of the revelation'. This science is directly related to the gradual revelation of the Qur'an and is in fact one of its wisdoms.

From the perspective of this science the Ayaat of the Qur'an are divided into two categories:

- 1) The Ayaat that are revealed without any particular circumstances. They aim primarily at guiding and educating mankind towards their salvation.
- 2) The Ayaat that although have the same aim and objective as the previous ones, they are revealed under certain circumstances or are in response to certain questions.

The circumstances under which the Ayaat are revealed hold the context of the Ayaat. Understanding such circumstances is called 'the science of the context of the revelation' ('Elme-Asbabu-Nozoul). For instance, it is narrated that the Jews of Madina who were upset with the unity of the Muslims made a mischief between the two Muslim tribes of 'Ous' and 'Khazraj'.

The people of the two tribes who were provoked by the Jews cried 'gun', 'gun' (meaning we shall fight). Upon that Ayah 100 and its following Ayaat of Surah Aale-Emran (ch.3) were revealed inviting the Muslims to unity. Similarly, the Prophet (S) was asked about Dhul-Qarnain and in response to that Ayaat 83-98 of Surah al-Kahf (ch. 18) were revealed.

The Benefits of the Science of Asbabu-Nozoul

Context plays an important role in speech recognition. Thus, one of the key points of understanding a speech is to understand the circumstances under which the speech is delivered.

The Holy Qur'an is the text of the Words of God delivered to us after more than 1400 years.

Undoubtedly, understanding the contexts of its sentences plays an important role in their understanding.

This science will become more vital when we consider the fact that the Qur'an –unlike the Bible– is not compiled in chronological order. As we learned in the previous lessons sometimes an Ayah which is revealed in Madina is placed– by the Divine Order– amidst the Ayaat of a Surah which is Makki, such as the last Ayah of Surah al-Mozzammel (ch.73). In other occasions even the beginning and the end of a present Ayah are not revealed at the same time, such as Ayah 3 of Surah al-Ma'edah (ch.5) and Ayah 33 of Surah al-Ahzab (ch.33). Therefore, to have a correct understanding of these Ayaat we ought to know their contexts.

In the following I shall site some examples to demonstrate the significance of understating the contextual meaning of the Ayah.

1) The Almighty Allah in Ayah 115 Surah 2 states: "And to Allah belong the east and the west, so whatever you turn there is the Face of Allah. Surely, Allah is All-Sufficient for His creatures' needs, All-Knowing."

The above Ayah seems to mean that facing the Qibla while praying is not a necessity. Any direction we face we are facing God and hence our prayers is on order. Nonetheless, Muslim scholars are unanimous that facing the Qibla is an obligatory condition.

The above misinterpretation of the Ayah will be disappeared when the context of the Ayah is understood. In one of the narrations, Ibn Abbas said: "The above Ayah is about changing of the Qibla. When the Almighty changed the Qibla of the Muslims from Baitul-Maqdes (Jerusalem) to Ka'ba, the Jews denied it and complained that it is not possible to change the direction of the Qibla. The above Ayah was revealed in response to them explaining that God can appoint any direction for His worship."

According to another narration the Ayah is about performing the Mustahab prayers whilst walking or riding (driving). In such situations the obligation of facing the Qibla is not a necessity.

2. The Almighty God in Surah al-Ma'edah states: ***"Those who believe and do righteous good deeds, thee is no sin on them for what they ate, if they fear Allah and believe and do righteous good deeds..."(5:93)***

Ignoring the context of the Ayah one may assume there is no diet restriction for a Muslim as long as he believes in God and does righteous deeds. This misinterpretation will soon disappear when the context of the Ayah is revealed.

When Ayah 90 of the same Surah was revealed in which all intoxications were strongly forbidden some of the companions of the Prophet (S) asked him: O Messenger of Allah! Some of us did believe in Allah and his Messenger and believed in the Hereafter. We even attended the battle of Badr and Uhud yet we used to drink alcohol for it was not then forbidden. Is there any reproach on us? Upon that the above

Ayah was revealed declaring that the new law is not retrospective.

3. The Almighty in Surah al-An'am states: ***"Say: I find not in that which has been revealed to me anything forbidden to be eaten by one who wishes to eat it, unless it be a dead animal (Maitah) or blood poured forth or flesh of swine (pork); for that is surely impure or impious (unlawful) meat which is slaughtered as a sacrifice for others than Allah."***(6: 145)

The phrase 'not...unless' grammatically indicates limitation of the rule of lawful and unlawful meat to what is specified. However, certainly the unlawful food is not limited to the above-mentioned categories. The meat of many wild animals as well as scaleless fish (according to the Shi'a) is unlawful.

The context of the Ayah is the solution to its correct understanding. To the pagans of Qoraysh the above four categories were all lawful. The Almighty Allah in response to their wrong belief states that nothing is forbidden but what you consider lawful. Thus, the limitation of the rule is relative not absolute for the context of the Ayah is not about listing all the forbidden foods.

4. The Almighty Allah in Surah al-Ma'edah states: ***"Lawful to you is (the pursuit of) water-game and its use for food-for the benefit of yourselves and those who travel, but forbidden is (the pursuit of) land-game as long as you are in the state of Ihram."***(5:96)

Many narrations explain the context of the Ayah: In the year 6 A.H. the Prophet (S) along with his companions dressed their clothes of Ihram for Umrah. On their way to Makka they saw many preys suitable for hunting. The animals were so closed to them that they could easily hunt them with their spears. The above Ayah was revealed warning them that it is not lawful for them to hunt the land animal while they are in the state of Ihram.

Therefore, the aim of the Ayah is to announce that when the pilgrims are in the state of Ihram they can only hunt the sea animals. The Ayah does not aim to describe what type of sea food is permissible and what type is not. Thus, the deduction of the Sunni scholars from the Ayah to allow all types of sea animals is incompatible with the context of the Ayah.

Generic Term not a Specific Context

As important as the context of an Ayah is, in many instances it does not limit the rules to the people about whom an Ayah is revealed. For instance, the four Ayaat of Surah al-Mojadalah (ch.58) were revealed in relation to one of the Muslims of Madina (Ous) who had angrily divorced his wife (Khoulah) according to the Jahiliyyah culture of divorce. When the lady complained to the Prophet (S) about her husband the Ayah was revealed:

"Indeed Allah has heard the statement of her that disputes with you concerning her husband..."(58: 1)

Similarly, Ayah 6 to 9 of Surah al-Noor (ch.24) were revealed with reference to two Muslim men (Sa'd Ibn 'Obadah and Hilal Ibn Omayyah) who had seen their wives committing adultery.

Many Ayaat of the Qur'an are revealed with reference to certain people. However, the rules are general and are not obviously limited to them. Thus, the Almighty Allah instead of mentioning their names He has referred to them utilising general 'relative pronouns' (her, those, etc) to indicate that although those people were the excuse of revelation of the rules, the rules are not limited to them.

It is worth mentioning that the general terms are not always as general as they seem to be. For instance consider the meaning of 'people' in the following Ayah:

"Those unto whom the people said: Verily, the people have gathered against you (a great army)..." (3: 173)

Obviously 'the people' in the beginning and the end of the Ayah cannot be the same people otherwise it would have been said: 'the people said: Verily, we...' As usual the context of the Ayah is the key to the solution of the problem.

The above Ayah was revealed after the battle of Uhud when Muslims by the order of the Prophet (S) were mobilized to chase the pagans' army. Abu-Sofyan (the chief of the pagans) met with some of the men from the tribe of Abdul-Qays who were travelling to Madina to purchase some wheat. He requested them to scare Muslims and inform Muhammad (S) and his companions that Qoraysh has mobilized a big army to fight Muslims. When the men of Abdul-Qays conveyed the message the above Ayah was revealed.

Problems of indicating Asbabul-Nozoul

As important the science of the context of the revelation is, there are many problems in identifying the correct context of the Ayaat.

1. The first and the main problem is that unfortunately most of the narrations are Mursal (the chain of narrators are not mentioned). Moreover, very often the narrators of the stories are the companions of the companions of the Prophet (S) who were not the eye witnesses to the scenes. One of the reasons for this problem is the tragic fate of Hadith after the demise of the Prophet (S). As we know the Caliphs –particularly Abu-Bakr, Omar and Othman– had banned the narration of the Hadith.
2. Very often there are different and sometimes contradictory narrations for the context of an Ayah. The contradiction becomes more vivid on controversial issues such as the leadership after the Prophet (S).
3. Very often the authenticity and the reliability of the narrators are dismissed by a particular sect if the narration is against their doctrine. For instance, Husain Ibn Hasan al-Ashqari narrated that the Ayah 23 of Surah al-Shourah (ch.42) is about Ali, Fatima and their sons. Yet, Ibn Katheer the famous Syrian

Sunni scholar rejects the narration with the only excuse that the narrator (Husain Ibn Hasan) is Shi'a!

4. Finally in many instances the narrators have mixed up the actual context of the revelation with an application of the Ayah. For instance, al-Termethi in a narration that he considered it authentic narrated from Ibn Abbas: "A Jewish man said to the Prophet (S): O Abul-Qasem! Would it not be better had God created the heavens so and so and the earth so and so and the oceans so and so and mountains so and so and His other creation so and so? Upon that the following Ayah was revealed: ***"They did not estimate Allah with estimation due to Him..." (6:91)***

Al-Soyouti after quoting the above narration comments: "It should be that the Prophet (S) has just recited the Ayah in response to the Jewish man, not that it was then revealed for the Ayah had been revealed in Makka.

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