

**Impacts of the Historical Context of the Revelation on  
Commentary on the Qur'an (The Case of the  
Chapter “al-Baqarah” / “The Cow”)**

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**Abstract**

Muslims have constructed a rich literature, called *tafseer*, which includes explanations and commentary on the Qur'an as a Divine Book and “the literal word of God.” Over the centuries, numerous studies have been made to interpret the Qur'an.

This paper examines interpretations of verses about the Jews and Christians in the chapter of “al-Baqarah” in the Qur'an, to determine to what extent the revelations of the Qur'an are treated as historical texts and how great the impact of the historical context of the period is. In other words, to what extent did sociohistorical context play a role in interpretations of the Qur'an.

The topic will be discussed within the framework of the *Tefsîr-e- Kebîr* of Mukâtil ibn Sulayman (d.150/767), which is the first commentary to survive up to our day that addresses all the chapters of the Qur'an and which is considered an example of *tafseer bi-al- riwaya* / tradition-based interpretation, and a few commentaries from the 20th and the 21st century.

Key Words: Qur'an, *tafseer*, historical context, Mukâtil ibn Sulayman, Jews, Christians.

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## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

In order to interpret the Quran better and more accurately, Muslims have constructed a rich literature, called *tafseer*, which includes explanations and commentary on the Quran, which they consider to be the words of Allah. The Quran has always been subject to interpretation, and different interpretations have arisen, depending on the history of interpretation and the interpreter.

This paper inquires into the impact of historical context on the interpretation of the verses related to the Jews and Christians in the chapter of al-Baqarah. In this regard, an analysis of the extent to which the revelations of the Quran were interpreted by Muslims as historical texts will be attempted.

The analysis will be based on the *Tafseer-e Kabîr*<sup>3</sup> of Mukâtil ibn Sulayman and on examples of some *tafseers* of the last two centuries: *In the Shade of the Qur'an (Fi Dhilal al-Qur'an)* by Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966);<sup>4</sup> a *tafseer* published by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, called *Kur'an Yolu Türkçe Meâl ve Tefsir (The Way of the Qur'an, Turkish Translation and Tafseer)*;<sup>5</sup> and the *tafseer*

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<sup>3</sup> Mukâtil ibn Süleyman, *Tafseer-e Kebîr*, ed. Ahmad Farîd, Beirut: Dar al-Kotob al-ilmiiyyah, no date.

<sup>4</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an-Fi Dhilal al-Qur'an*, trans. Adil Salahi, UK: Islamic Foundation, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Hayreddin Karaman, Mustafa Çağrıç, İbrahim Kâfi Dönmez, Sadrettin Gümüş, *Kur'an Yolu Türkçe Meâl ve Tefsir*, Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2007.

of Süleyman Ateş, titled *Kur'an-I Kerim Tefsiri (The Tafseer of al-Qur'an al-Kareem)*.<sup>6</sup>

The surah “al-Baqarah”/ “The Cow,” which will furnish our examples, is the second and longest chapter of the Qur'an.<sup>7</sup> It is considered to be one of the first chapters revealed after Prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina. The surah's name refers to verses 66-72, which recall the story of a cow sacrificed by the Israelites. The surah contains many passages related to the Jews and Jewish history, including intellectual polemics between the Quran and the Jews of Medina. The surah “al-Baqarah” also includes descriptions of Christianity, but these verses are smaller in number compared to those related to the Jews.

First, I will describe in general how the Jews and Christians are scrutinized in the surah al-Baqarah:

We see in the surah that the Jews are referred to as “the Children of Israel” (Benî Israel)<sup>8</sup> and as Hûd / Yahûd / Hâdu<sup>9</sup>, or “those to whom We have sent the Book” (*alladhina ataynahum al-kitab*), and Christians are referred to as *nasara*. We also come across the epithet “the People of the Book”<sup>10</sup> (*ahl al-kitab*), which refers to both groups together.

When we take the surah “al-Baqarah” literally, we see that the Jews are not expressly addressed until the 40<sup>th</sup> verse, which starts with the appeal “O Children

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<sup>6</sup> Süleyman Ateş, *Kur'an-ı Kerim'in Yüce Meali ve Çağdaş Tefsiri*, Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Yayınları, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Baqara>" \1 "cite\_note-1).

<sup>8</sup> al-Baqarah, 2: 40, 47, 122, 211. In this text, English translations of verses from the Quran have been taken from M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> al-Baqarah, 2: 62, 111, 113, 120, 135, 140.

<sup>10</sup> al-Baqarah, 2: 105, 109; this statement also includes Christians.

of Israel” and calls the Jews to believe in the Quran by referring to their recent history.

With this appeal, the Quran reminds the Jews of the blessings they are endowed with, urging them to keep their covenant with God and believe in the Quran that confirms their book, and it exhorts them not to confuse the truth with falsity.

While addressing the Jews, the Quran particularly emphasizes the blessings and the superiority to the rest of the world bestowed upon them by God.

The Quran also reminds the Jews that God saved their ancestors from the atrocities of the Pharaoh and that God excused them even when they started worshipping a calf in Moses’ absence. It also states that it has given Moses al-Kitab and al-Furqan.<sup>11</sup>

When the Quran refers to events in the history of Israel, it mentions their Sabbath tradition and the trouble they made when Moses told them, “God wants you to slaughter a cow.”<sup>12</sup>

It is stated in the Quran that the Children of Israel did not keep their covenant with God to accept Allah as their only God, whom they should worship by engaging in good acts towards close relatives, orphans, and poor people, by speaking good words to people, and by praying and giving alms, which underlines the fact that they ignored the truth, except for a small portion thereof.<sup>13</sup>

The Quran also states that the Jews responded, “We believe only in what is revealed to us,” which is a jaundiced view when they were called to believe in

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<sup>11</sup> al-Baqarah, 2: 40-53.

<sup>12</sup> al-Baqarah, 2: 65-71.

<sup>13</sup> al-Baqarah, 2 :83.

the verses communicated by God, which confirmed their book, and this attitude would earn them a degrading torment.<sup>14</sup>

When we look at the verses in the surah “al-Baqarah” that refer to Christians, we see that they are mentioned alongside Jews:

*“The believers, the Jews, the Christians and the Sabians – all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good-will have their rewards with their Lord.”*<sup>15</sup>

*“They also say, ‘No one will enter Paradise unless he is a Jew or a Christian.’*<sup>16</sup>

*“The Jews say, ‘The Christians have no ground whatsoever to stand on,’ and the Christians say, ‘The Jews have no ground whatsoever to stand on,’ though they both read the Scripture, and those who have no knowledge say the same; God will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection concerning their differences.”*<sup>17</sup>

*“The Jews and Christians will never be pleased with you unless you follow their ways.”*<sup>18</sup>

*“They say, ‘Become Jews or Christians, and you will be rightly guided....’”*<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> al-Baqarah, 2: 89-91.

<sup>15</sup> al-Baqarah, 2: 62.

<sup>16</sup> al-Baqarah, 2: 111.

<sup>17</sup> al-Baqarah, 2: 113

<sup>18</sup> al-Baqarah, 2: 120

<sup>19</sup> al-Baqarah, 2: 135

## **Impacts of the Historical Context of the Revelation on the Commentary of the Quran**

Now let us try to present, through some examples, the impact of historical context on interpretations of the passages related to the Jews and Christians in the surah “al-Baqarah.”

### **Example 1**

1. *Alif Lam Mim*
2. *This is Scripture in which there is no doubt, containing guidance for those who are mindful of God,*
3. *who believe in the unseen, keep up prayer, and give out of what We have provided for them;*
4. *those who believe in the revelation sent down to you, and in what was sent down to you, and in what was sent before you, those who have firm faith in the Hereafter,*
5. *such people are following their Lord’s guidance, and it is they who will prosper. (al-Baqarah, 2:1-5)*

The Jews are literally addressed in these passages, which form the beginning of the surah “al-Baqarah,” and Mukâtil relates the reason for the revelation of the first five verses of this surah to an incident involving the Jews. He narrates that when the Prophet Mohammad called Ka’b ibn al-Ashraf and Ka’b ibn Asîd of the Jews to Islam, they did not adhere, but responded, “God has not sent any book after Moses.”

Mukâtil says that the word *they* in verse four refers to Abdullah b. Sallâm, a Jew who adhered to Islam, and to his friends Asîd ibn Zayd, Asad ibn Ka’b, Sallâm ibn Qays, Tha’laba ibn Amr and Ibn Yâmîn.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Mukâtil, I, 28-29.

It is evident that Mukâtil identifies the reason for the revelation of the relevant verses, as well as the personalities referred to, in the light of historical evidence. When we consider more recent *tafseers*, we see that these verses are interpreted in terms of a very broad framework; these *tafseers* do not take into account the dialogue preceding verses 1-5, nor whom is referred to in al-Baqarah.<sup>21</sup>

### Example 2

*“People, worship your Lord, who created you and those before you, so that you may be mindful”* (al-Baqarah, 2:21).

Mukâtil interprets the word *people* in this verse to mean “the hypocrites and the Jews” during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. This interpretation indicates his relationship with the historical context of his era.<sup>22</sup>

When we consider the recent *tafseers*, we see that the word *people* is interpreted to mean all mankind. For instance, Qutb explains this passage as follows: “This appeal is to all mankind. All mankind is called to worship the God who created them and those before them.”<sup>23</sup>

In the ‘*Kur’an Yolu Türkçe Meâl ve Tefsir*’, it is stated that this divine call is made to all mankind without any exception for religion, language, race, region, or class.”<sup>24</sup>

### Example 3

*“Those who break their covenant with God after it has been confirmed, who sever the bonds that God has commanded to be joined, who spread corruption on the earth – these are the losers.”* (al-Baqarah, 2:27)

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<sup>21</sup> See. Qutb, I, 25-31, Karaman et.al., I, 72; Ateş, I, 30-35.

<sup>22</sup> Mukâtil, I, 36.

<sup>23</sup> Qutb, I, 37.

<sup>24</sup> Karaman et.al., I, 85.

Mukâtil states that the expression “those who break their covenant with God” refers to the Jews and their failure to keep their first covenant with God, and interprets the verse in this way: “The Jews broke their first testament, and violated the covenant in the Old Testament that they would shall worship God, not equate anything with God, and have faith in Muhammad. They denied both Jesus and Muhammad. They believed in some of the prophets and denied some of them ... They [the Jews] are in great loss.”<sup>25</sup>

In the ‘*Kur’an Yolu Türkçe Meal ve Tefsir*’ on the Quran, one of the recent *tafseers*, the appeal is said to address all mankind and denotes the failure of all mankind to keep their covenant with God. The verse is interpreted as follows:

Another characteristic of the bad morals and behaviors of those who defy the orders of god and engage in a rebellion is their failure to keep their covenant with God. This covenant is either the promise to recognize Allah as their God in response to the question of divinity “*Am I not your God?*” (al-A’raf, 7:172), which includes acknowledgement of Allah as God, and pledging allegiance to Him as subjects or the promises made by referring to God in everyday life.<sup>26</sup>

#### **Example 4**

*“Children of Israel, remember how I blessed you. Honour your pledge to Me and I will honour My pledge to you: I am the One you should fear.*

*Believe in the message I have sent down confirming what you already possess. Do not be the first to disbelieve in it, and do not sell My messages for a small price: I am the One of whom you should be mindful.*

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<sup>25</sup> See. Mukâtil, I, 38-39.

<sup>26</sup> Karaman et.al., I, 94.



*Do not mix truth with falsehood, or hide the truth when you know it.”* (al-Baqarah, 2:40-42)

Mukâtil points out that the verse “Believe in the message I have sent down confirming what you already possess” was originally about Ka’b ibn al-Ashraf, the leader of Jews, and his friends, but all of the Jews followed one another in rejecting this verse. Mukâtil goes on to say that the statement “do not sell My messages for a small price” is intended for the leadership of the Jews. As they would be deprived of the crops and harvests reaped by the lower classes if those classes subjected themselves to Muhammad, it is emphasized that they concealed the situation of Muhammad.

Mukâtil states that the verse “*Do not mix truth with falsehood, or hide the truth when you know it*” refers to the Jews who had a relationship with Muhammad at that time. Mukâtil thinks that the expression “*do not hide the truth when you know it*” implies that Muhammad’s prophecy and qualities in the Old Testament were concealed by Jews even if they had known of them.<sup>27</sup> As can be seen here, Mukâtil interprets the verses in their historical context, and avoids attributing to them a universal dimension.

Qutb interprets the verse “*Do not mix truth with falsehood*” with reference to the notion that the Jews are the primary cause of suffering, unrest, and chaos among Muslims.<sup>28</sup> With this interpretation, he attributes a generalizing and timeless negative aspects to the Jews.<sup>29</sup>

In the ‘*Kur’an Yolu Türkçe Meal ve Tefsir*’, the historical background of these verses is referred to in order to make the following point: “Thus warns Jews, and indirectly Muslims, and even the whole mankind not to confuse the truth and

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<sup>27</sup> Mukâtil, I, 44-45.

<sup>28</sup> Qutb, I, 66.

<sup>29</sup> Qutb, I, 66.

reality with the wrongness on purpose under the influence of material and profane interests, egoistic desires and tendencies.”<sup>30</sup> This interpretation carries the target mass and message of the verse to a point beyond history.

In another recent *tafseer*, the verse "*do not sell My messages for a small price*" is given a timeless and universal meaning that "in every age, there are those who misinterpret religion on purpose in order to keep their advantages and interests. There are quasi-religious people who interpret the holy verses, even showing the wrong as right in a way to satisfy those in power in order to earn an advantaged position or keep their positions. Quran warns these people, ordering them not to "sell God's messages for a small price."<sup>31</sup>

### Example 5

*“The Jews and the Christians will never be pleased with you unless you follow their ways.”* (al-Baqarah, 2:120)

Muqatil restricts his interpretation of the Jews to “the Jews of Medina” and of the Christians to “the Christians of Najran” by directly referring to these communities.<sup>32</sup>

In the *Kur’an Yolu Türkçe Meal ve Tefsir*, the Jews and Christians referred to are defined as the People of the Book and generalized as agents of a negative stance towards Muslims throughout history. The analysis made in this respect yields the following statement:

The Quranic conclusion that Jews and Christians will not favor Muslims as long as Muslims do not adhere to their religions is a truth that has been proven historically as well,

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<sup>30</sup> Karaman et.al., I, 115-116.

<sup>31</sup> Ateş, I, 65-66.

<sup>32</sup> Mukâtil, I, 75.

due to the fact that although Muslims were in a fair and humane stance towards the people of the Book settled in their region, and that cities of Islam provide shelter for them, starting with the invasion of Muslim Spain, all Jewish and Christian governments in Islamic countries have engaged in oppressive and exploitative policies that frequently involved violence against Muslims.<sup>33</sup>

**Conclusion:**

The conclusion we would like to draw from this analysis is as follows:

In Islamic tradition, there are authors of *tafseer* who take into consideration the circumstances and conditions under which the Quranic verses were written and who thus engage in contextual readings of the Quran. Mukâtil ibn Sulayman, whose *tafseer* we take as the basis of this discussion, is one of these authors who interpret verses within their historical context. When explicating Quranic passages within their original framework, Mukâtil ibn Sulayman pays attention to time and place, interpreting the relationship between the events and the discourse by relating to the first addressees.<sup>34</sup> However, in the modern period, as we have seen above, the common attitude appears to be that the addressees populate a general and universal context beyond history, rather than being situated solely within their historical context.

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<sup>33</sup> Karaman et.al., I, 200.

<sup>34</sup> See also Halis Albayrak, "Mukatil b. Süleyman'ın Tefsirinde Söz-Muhatap-Anlam İlişkisi," in *Kur'an ve İslami İlimlerin Anlaşılmasında Tarihin Önemi*, ed. Mahfuz Söylemez, Ankara: Ankara Okulu Yayınları, 2013, 83-105.

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