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INTERPRETATION OF THE CONCEPT OF AHL AL-KITAB IN THE QUR'AN AND HADITHS

Abstract. *The teaching of Islam is distinguished from other religions by its tolerance, mutual understanding, and respect for representatives of other faiths. The sacred sources of Islam – the Qur'an and hadiths – pay special attention to this principle, dividing representatives of other religions into two categories: those who received a divinely revealed book (Ahl al-Kitab), and those who follow polytheistic beliefs such as Magianism and fire-worship. The concept of Ahl al-Kitab, meaning “People of the Book,” is the general name for the peoples to whom the heavenly Book was revealed by God, encompassing Jews (People of the Torah) and Christians (People of the Gospel). This article analyzes the place of the Ahl al-Kitab concept in Islamic religion and the lives of Muslims, and examines Qur'anic and hadith perspectives on how Muslims should relate to the People of the Book and representatives of other religions.*

Keywords: *Islam; Ahl al-Kitab; People of the Book; Qur'an; Sunnah; tolerance; interfaith relations; dhimma; Jewish; Christian; Sabians; Magians; religious pluralism.*

INTRODUCTION

Islam has historically distinguished itself by its tolerance and by the establishment of relations with representatives of other religions on the basis of mutual peace and solidarity. One of the principal components of this policy of tolerance is the concept of “Ahl al-Kitab,” whose significance is reinforced by the sacred sources of Islam, the Qur'an and hadiths. This principle continues to serve today as an ideological foundation in relations between Muslim countries and states in which other religious worldviews prevail.

The Arabic expression “Ahl al-Kitab” (أهل الكتاب) means “Those who believe in the divine Book.” Accordingly, Muslims themselves could in principle be called Ahl al-Kitab;

however, this combination – which does not appear in religious books other than the Qur'an – is used terminologically for representatives of other religions who possess a sacred scripture, as distinct from Muslims (‘Abdulbaqi, 1950:781). The aim of this article is to analyze the scope and content of the Ahl al-Kitab concept on the basis of Qur'anic and hadith sources, to examine its application to different religious communities, and to assess its implications for Muslim relations with non-Muslims.

METHODS

The article employs source-critical and comparative analytical methods. The primary sources are the Holy Qur'an and the hadith literature, including Imam Malik's "al-Muwatta'" (Malik ibn Anas, 1999). The principal exegetical sources are al-Tabari's "Jami' al-Bayan" (al-Tabari, 1986), Ibn Kathir's "Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim" (Ibn Kathir, 1971) and "al-Sira al-Nabawiyya" (Ibn Kathir, 1976), Mujahid ibn Jabr al-Makki (1976), and Abu Yusuf (1397 AH, 1985). Modern comparative sources include Vajda (2002), Hamidullah (1969, 1985, 1989), and the TDV Encyclopedia of Islam (2012). The analysis proceeds by examining Qur'anic usage of the term, its application to Jews, Christians, Sabians, and Magians, and finally the legal and social implications of the concept in Islamic jurisprudence.

RESULTS

Qur'anic usage and scope of the term. The term "Ahl al-Kitab" appears thirty-one times in the Holy Qur'an, all in verses revealed in the late Meccan and Medinan periods. In two earlier verses – Surah al-Nahl (16:43) and Surah al-Anbiya (21:7) – the expression "Ahl al-Dhikr" (رَكَذِلَا لَهُ) is used with the same meaning, referring to the scholars of the People of the Book who possess correct and sufficient knowledge of the Torah and the Gospel. In addition, the Qur'an employs the words "Yahud" for Jews and "Nasara" for Christians in numerous places (‘Abdulbaqi, 1950:781). Surah al-Ma'ida (5:47) also contains the specific expression "Ahl al-Injil" referring exclusively to Christians.

In other Qur'anic verses, the People of the Book are addressed as "Those given the Book" (al-Baqara 2:101, 144, 145; Al 'Imran 3:19, 20, 100, 186), "Those to whom We gave the Book" (al-Baqara 2:121, 146), and "Those given a portion of the Book" (Al 'Imran 3:23; al-Nisa 4:44). Al-Tabari's "Jami' al-Bayan" also identifies the expression "Those given knowledge" in Surah al-Isra (17:107), Surah al-Hajj (22:54), and Surah

Saba' (34:6) as referring to the People of the Book (al-Tabari, 1986:XV:120). Furthermore, in Islamic literature the term "kitabi" (kitab-bearer) is sometimes used as an alternative to Ahl al-Kitab.

The scope of the concept: which prophets received books? To understand the scope of Ahl al-Kitab, it is necessary first to determine who received divine books. The Qur'an states that some prophets received books while others received scrolls (suhuf) and psalms. The descendants of Noah and Abraham were given prophethood and a book (al-Nisa:54; al-Hadid 57:26); Moses and Jesus were given a book; David was given the Zabur (Psalms); and Abraham was given scrolls. Hadiths also record that Adam, Shith, and Idris (peace be upon them all) received scrolls ('Abdulbaqi, 1950:258).

The first exegetes of the Qur'an, taking into account the verse "Before you, two groups were given a book" (al-An'am 6:156), emphasized that when the expression Ahl al-Kitab is used, Jews and Christians are meant (al-Makki, 1976:186; al-Tabari, 1986:VIII:69; Ibn Kathir, 1971:44). While the Hanbali and Shafi'i schools, based on this verse, considered only Jews and Christians as Ahl al-Kitab, the Hanafi school held that any people who believe in a divine religion and possess a book revealed through divine revelation – such as the Torah, Zabur, Gospel, or Scrolls – are to be regarded as Ahl al-Kitab.

Sabians and Magians in relation to the concept. With the spread of Islam, the view that Ahl al-Kitab refers exclusively to Jews and Christians began to change. One reason for this was the Qur'anic mention of Sabianism and Magianism alongside Judaism and Christianity, with these religions possessing their own distinctive books. Another was the political, economic, and social conditions that necessitated expansion of the concept (TDV, 2012:517).

Authentic Sabianism was viewed in early Islamic sources as a branch of Judaism or Christianity and treated as Ahl al-Kitab – a view supported by Abu Hanifa and Ahmad ibn Hanbal. Magians are mentioned only once in the Qur'an (al-Hajj 22:17) without elaboration. The majority of classical Muslim scholars did not count Magians as Ahl al-Kitab. The Prophet (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Treat the Magians as you treat the People of the Book" (Malik ibn Anas, 1999:278), but he prohibited eating animals they slaughtered and marrying their women (Hamidullah, 1985:150). 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with him), who stated that the Magians were among the People of the Book, also emphasized that because of their polytheism, Muslims are forbidden to eat their slaughtered animals and marry their women (Abu Yusuf, 1397 AH:141). Imam al-Shafi'i, basing himself on 'Ali's statement, regarded them as Ahl al-Kitab (al-Shafi'i,

1321 AH:158). According to al-Shahristani, the status of the Magians as Ahl al-Kitab is doubtful: the scrolls given to Abraham were taken back to heaven because of their actions, so while they are in the status of Ahl al-Kitab by virtue of having received scrolls, the scrolls were returned to heaven because of their deeds – and for this reason Muslims may not eat their slaughtered animals or marry their women (al-Shahristani, 1968:II:13).

DISCUSSION

The Qur'an addresses the People of the Book primarily as Jews and Christians, since these two communities were present in the Hijaz region, lived alongside Muslims, and were familiar to the Arabs among whom the Qur'an was revealed. These communities believed in God, prophecy, the afterlife, and revealed books – despite their errors and shortcomings – and thus shared a theological common ground with Islam that the polytheistic Arabs and Magians did not. Qur'anic verses address both the praiseworthy people among the Ahl al-Kitab (Al 'Imran 3:75, 113–115, 119) and the disbelievers among them (al-Baqara 2:105; al-Bayyina 98:1), documenting their rejection of God's signs, their falsification of their scriptures, their killing of prophets, and their attempts to lead Muslims astray (Barakat, 1959:450).

On the question of the origins of the Qur'an, the Hungarian-French scholar Georg Vajda argued that certain similarities between the Qur'an and the Torah and Gospel indicate the Qur'an was derived from them (Vajda, 2002:I:265). This claim is contradicted by the Qur'anic position itself, which presents all divinely revealed books as originating from a single source. The Qur'an repeatedly calls the People of the Book to acknowledge and apply what they have received: "Say: O People of the Book, you have no ground unless you uphold the Torah, the Gospel, and what has been sent down to you from your Lord" (al-Ma'ida 5:68). This formulation itself indicates that these earlier revelations confirm the Qur'an, not the reverse.

The practical legal consequences of the Ahl al-Kitab status are significant and well documented. The first Constitution of Medina, drafted by the Prophet (peace be upon him), guaranteed the lives, property, and religion of the Jews alongside Muslims (Hamidullah, 1985:61; Ibn Kathir, 1976:320). Article 25 of the Constitution declared: "The Jews of Banu 'Awf are one community with the believers. The religion of the Jews is for themselves and the religion of the Muslims for themselves." Articles 26–33 established equal rights for the People of the Book alongside Muslims, and Article 16 stipulated that no injustice was to be done to them. The first formal covenant with the

People of the Book was concluded with the Christians of Najran, granting them all the rights that Muslims possessed (Abu Yusuf, 1985:180–181). The Caliph ‘Umar, through the Jerusalem Agreement, guaranteed the safety of the lives and property of the People of the Book and gave them freedom regarding their churches and places of pilgrimage (Numani, 1965:II:209–217).

CONCLUSION

Islam created the conditions for Muslims to establish the highest form of positive relations with the communities who received divine books, by permitting marriage with their women and the consumption of food they prepare. The People of the Book living in Islamic society are entitled to full freedom of belief. As citizens of a Muslim state, they possess the same rights before the law as Muslims: what benefits a Muslim benefits the People of the Book, and what harms a Muslim harms them equally. The various special rules that apply in certain domains are exceptions connected primarily with matters of public order (‘Ozel, 1991:311–319).

The influence of Islam’s policy of tolerance in Muslim-Ahl al-Kitab relations has been a constant feature throughout Islamic history. The principle “There is no compulsion in religion” (al-Baqara 2:256), the guarantee of religious freedom alongside fundamental human rights, the return of Torah manuscripts to the Jews after the Khaybar campaign (Chaliskan, 1986:63), and the protections extended in subsequent historical covenants all testify to the enduring practical significance of the Ahl al-Kitab concept as a foundation for principled interfaith coexistence (Hamidullah, 1985; Ibn Kathir, 1976; Numani, 1965).

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