

International Journal of Social, Political and Economic Research

IJOSPER

ISSN: 2667-8810 (Online)

ijosper.uk

OPEN ACCESS

Original Article

Received Date: 03-03-2021

Accepted Date: 06-04-2021

doi.org/10.46291/IJOSPERvol8iss1pp188-197

Akram Khan's Approaches to Biblical Sources in His *Tafsīrsoho Qur'an Sharif**

Mohammad Ataullah Khaled

Lecturer, Dept. of Islamic Studies, Cox's Bazar International University. Email:

ataullahkhaled@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper examines, following an analytical and descriptive methodology, Akram Khan's approaches towards Biblical sources in his commentary on Qur'an known as Tafsīrsoho Qur'an Sharif (The Noble Qur'an with Tafsīr), and, thereby, intends to understand his methodology in Qur'anic exegesis. Akram Khan denies the acceptance of Biblical sources more than once in his work. Even he attacks on authors and narrators who narrated, or allowed them in their works or showed a positive approach towards them. Akram Khan's rigorous stance against Biblical narratives and strong criticism of the exegeses who allowed those sources in their works can often lead to the assumption that he simply does not find Biblical sources reliable, like many classical and modern writers. But a close inspection reveals that it is not the soundness and validity of Biblical sources what makes him reject them, rather it is more about his preference of reason and rationalism.

Key Words: Akrom Khan, Tafsīrsoho Qur'an Sharif, Tafsīr, Bangla, Biblical.

Akrom Hân'ın Tafsīrsoho Kur'ân Şerifi'nde İsrâili Rivayetlerine Olan Yaklaşımı

Özet

Bu çalışmada, analitik ve betimsel bir metodoloji takip edilmekte, Akrom Hân'ın Tafsīrsoho Kur'ân Şerif (Tafsīrle birlikte Kur'ân Şerif) adlı eserinde İsrâili rivayetlerine olan yaklaşımı, ve böylece Kur'ân tefsirinde takip edilen metodolojini ortaya konulmaya çalışılmıştır. Akrom Hân, İsrâili rivayetlerin kaynak değerliliği eserinde defalarca

* This article is a moderated partial translation of my on-going PhD thesis. I must express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Prof. Dr. Ahmet Nedim Serinsu, without whose valuable suggestions and guidance this work would not be possible. I also must thank brother Md. Toha for his unforgettable help with the translation.

reddetmektedir. Hatta, bu rivayetleri nakleden, eserlerinde yer veren veya bunlara musamahat gösteren ravi ve müfessirleri de ağır bir dilde eliştirilmektedir. İsrâîli rivayetlerine olan bu sert duruşu ve bunlara musamahat gösteren müfessirlere yapan ağır eliştiri, ilk bakışta Akrom Hân'ın, diğer bazı klasik ve modern yazarlarda olduğu gibi, İsrâîli rivayetleri başvurabilecek kaynak olarak değerlendirmedeği fikrine yol açsa da; daha yakın bir inceleme, onun bu yaklaşımın arkasında İsrâîli rivayetlerin dayanmazlığı değil, kendisinin rasyonellik ve mantığı olan sevgisi yer aldığı ortaya çıkmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Akram Hân, Tafsîrsoho Kur'ân Şerif, Tefsîr, Bengalce, İsrâîliyat

Introduction:

Akram Khan's (1868-1969) *Tafsîrsoho Qur'an Sharif (The Noble Qur'an with Tafsîr)* carries a great significance not only for being the first full-length Bengali *tafsîr* work, but also for his peculiar approaches in the work.

Akram Khan is considered to be one of a few Bengali Muslim scholars who successfully left his mark on Bengali Muslim intellectual and political world. Akram Khan was born in 1868, in Chabbis Pargana of present West Bengal, India. Being from a scholastic family, he was blessed with Islamic knowledge from the beginning of his life. Later he successfully completed his academic life with his graduation from Calcutta Alia Madrasha in 1901.¹

Akram Khan is mostly famous as writer for his, *inter alia*, *Mostofa Chorita*, an incredible Bengali work on the life of the Prophet, and *Tafsîrsoho Qur'an Sharif*, the first full-length Bengali Qur'an exegesis. In these two works he successfully demonstrated the profoundness of his knowledge and his sagacity in research and analysis. His love for facts and reason is evident in those works. He also is considered to be a pioneer of Muslim Bengali media world for his role as editor in *Weakly Muhammadi*, and in the creation of *al-Eslam*. Alike his scholastic life, Akram Khan holds a unique position in the political history of the colonial Muslim-Bengal too. Akram Khan served as the president of Bengal Muslim League.² He is also remembered for his strong role in Khilafat Movement. Akram Khan's bright carrier ends with his death in 1969 at Dhaka, the capital of then East-Pakistan and present Bangladesh.

Tafsîrsoho Qur'an Sharif is Akram Khan's greatest work with no doubt. The work is significant in many ways. In the face of Arabic, the language of Qur'an, the Prophetic traditions and other primary sources of Islamic knowledge, Persian, the language of Turko-Persian Muslim rulers of

¹ Md. Mahmudul Hasan, "Introduction", *Selections from Akram Khan's Tafsîrul Qur'an*, ed. Md. Mahmudul Hasan (Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Islamic Thought, 2009), 19.

² Shah Abdul Hannan, "Foreword", *Selections from Akram Khan's Tafsîrul Qur'an*, 12.

India, and also of the early Muslim Sufi preachers came to this region from Persia, And Urdu, a language developed within the ruling class of the Muslim-India, thereby obtained a religious significance among Muslim scholars, Bengali had always been neglected in the Muslim intellectual circle. Akram Khan's *Tafsīrsoho Qur'an Sharif* is a milestone in that sense. *It is true that there were few translations and short commentaries before that; but this is the first full-length tafsīr of the Qur'an produced in the Bangla language in a true sense.*³

Besides being the first ever Bengali Qur'anic exegesis, *Tafsīrsoho Qur'an Sharif* also holds a great importance for authors unique approach, unfamiliar in the classic Sunni oriented Bengali Muslim society. His methodological uniqueness in *Tafsīrsoho Qur'an Sharif* is visible in many aspects. Be it the grand volume of classical and modern *tafsīr* works consulted in the work, or his extensive reference to modern western studies; his immense dependence on Arabic lexicography, or deep insight into Biblical sources; his cautiousness in accepting *tafsīr* reports, or sheer endeavour in defending fundamentals; not only in the Indian Subcontinent, a few *tafsīr* work can match Akram Khan's *Tafsīrsoho Qur'an Sharif* in the Muslim world in terms of the originality and methodological astuteness it possesses. This study will focus on his approach towards the Biblical sources in *Tafsīrsoho Qur'an Sharif*.

Unfortunately, this great work never received the attention it deserves among Bengali Muslims, both laymen and scholars. Particularly, besides an introductory note on his life and *Tafsīrsoho Qur'an Sharif* by Shah Abdul Hannan, and a translation work on the *Selections from Akram Khan's Tafsīrul Qur'an*, nothing worth mentioning have been done in English on Akram Khan and his *tafsīr*. We hope that this study will contribute to introducing this great scholar and his thinking to the international audiences.

The Credibility of Biblical Sources in *Tafsīrsoho Qur'an Sharif* by Akram Khan

Akram Khan holds a robust position against Biblical narratives. He, mostly derived by his love for reason and influenced by the rational approaches towards Qur'an, found among a minor group of exeges, both classic and modern, explicitly rejects the soundness and validity of Biblical narratives as the source of Qur'anic exegesis and often criticizes exeges for relying on or accepting them. While commenting on, for instance, the 22nd verse of the 5th chapter – *They replied, "O Moses! There is an enormously powerful nation there, so we will never be able to*

³ Hannan, *Selections from Akram Khan*, 12.

enter it until they leave. If they do, then we will enter,” – he blames the disbelief and distrust of Israelites to be behind this cowardice and claims that all the fictitious and epicurious stories about the Amalek nation, which later found their ground in Biblical narratives with exaggeration, were the creation of those ten coward representatives, who wanted to avoid the war and, therefore, tried to dispirit Israelites. Akram Khan then narrates a portion of those narratives to demonstrate their fraudulency. His stance against Biblical narratives is even evident in his word selection:

“The twelve representatives enter a garden house after reaching the Kenan region. The landlord was reaping fruits in the garden meanwhile. He puts all the representatives into his basket and brings them to the king. The king sends back them to Mosses with a grape for each to let Mosses learn the situation there. *Oh! I forgot to say that a single grape was enough to feed one Israelite for one day.* This kind of narratives found their way into almost every Qur’anic commentary, except for the cautious authors stated their fraudulency.”⁴ (Italic mine)

As it can be seen above, Akram Khan chose a mocking way to narrate the story, which clearly indicates to his feud with those narratives. Even he did not feel uncomfortable to use the word “garbage” to describe them. At the end of the discussion, Akram Khan sates the motive behind allowing these narratives in his work saying “I express my concern for citing this *garbage* here. Yet, this was necessary to awake the readers.”⁵

Akram Khan tries to depict the way these narratives enter the Qur’anic exegesis while interpreting Q19:16-28. He states that to establish the godhead of Jesus, Christian world endeavoured for centuries and, as a result, innumerable bogus stories came into existence around Jesus and Mary. Those forgeries reached Arabs by passing many hands in a more colourful state. In the ending of the 1st century and the beginning of the 2nd century of the Hijra, after improving the materialistic condition of the Muslim world, Muslims scholars came to encounter the Christian intellectual world in a greater level, which paved the way to those narratives to find their way to the Qur’anic commentaries.⁶

In Akram Khan’s view, Biblical narratives no way constitute a source of knowledge. The Qur’anic verses on past nations, according to him, could only be elucidated either within other

⁴ Akrom Khan, *Tafsīrsoho Qur’an Sharif (The Noble Qur’an with Tafsīr)* (Dakka: Khosroz Kitap Mahal, 2016), II/145-46.

⁵ Khan, *Qur’an Sharif*, II/46.

⁶ Khan, *Qur’an Sharif*, III/410.

Qur'anic verses, or authentic Prophetic traditions, or reliable historical evidences. To him, there is no use of the Biblical sources to elaborate the verses about Jesus and his mother Mary – which have not been stated in Qur'an in details, for being not a book of history but a book of guidance and only includes a portion of prophetic histories for the purpose of education – as those sources had been forged and are not reliable in any standard. After invalidating the credibility of the Biblical sources, author states that Q19:16 only provides us with the information of Mary's leaving for somewhere in the east, and that is what we should be satisfied with knowing. Immediately after stating this, he counts the four, adding one more to the above mentioned three, basic elements of Qur'anic exegesis – other verses of Qur'an, authentic Prophetic traditions, Arabic lexicography and reliable historical data. In addition, he offers one more sources, in case those four fail to provide a detailed account of exegesis – logic and human reasoning. But, he states, in no way making up stories could be a way of interpreting divine verses.⁷

Although he rejects the validity of Biblical sources repeatedly, he has been found to refer to them more than once, particularly whenever they favour his stance. For instance, when commenting on “Indeed, We sent Noah to his people, and he remained among them for a thousand years, less fifty. Then the Flood overtook them, while they persisted in wrongdoing.” (Q 29:14) he rejects the words of Torah “And Noah lived after the flood three hundred and fifty years. And all the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years, and he died.” (Genesis 9:28–29) to be accepted as a source to elaborate the verse. And there has not been reported, he says, any authentic Prophetic traditions regarding the issue. Therefore, to him, there is not any other option but relying completely on Arabic lexicography. Then he takes the word *labitha* (لبث) into account. *labitha* stands for to stay in Arabic. The word refers to stay both alive and dead. Therefore, Akram Khan offers, the verse can readily be interpreted to refer to the total duration of existence of Noah's teaching among his followers. Qur'an offers the 950 years of living duration for Noah. Torah offers a same figure. Torah could easily be a tool to validate Qur'an's claim, except he rejects Torah's accountability and offers a different explanation grounded in Arabic lexicography. Surprisingly, to establish his peculiar explanation, he inclines to Torah-

⁷ Khan, *Qur'an Sharif*, III/411-12.

“one aspect need to be drawn to readers attention here regarding the issue, that according to the prophetic chronology provided in the Bible, it had been 952 years between Noah and the birth of Abraham, which could be taken into consideration as a thematic evidence.”⁸

A similar case can be observed in Q2:259, where the story of someone who passes by a ruined city and wonders how God is going to bring this dead town back to life, so God causes him to pass away for a duration of hundred years before bringing back him to life and asks him that how long he has been in that state, he assumes the duration to be a day or part of a day, God informs him that he has been dead for a duration of hundred years and tells him to pay attention to his food and drinks which has been remained sound, also to his donkey of which nothing but bones are left, then God brings the donkey back to life in front of him, and witnessing that, he declares that God is the most capable of everything, has been narrated. Muslim scholars usually suggest this event to be taken place in real life. Akram Khan, relying on Torah, proposes this to be in Ezekiel’s imagination. And the hundred years of death to him refers to the hundred years of darkness of Jews history, which is going to be improved in the hands of three later prophets.

Akram Khan takes two words *qar’ya* (قرية) and *ba’atha* (بعث), found in the verse, into consideration. Where other authors refer by the former to a town which had been subject to physical destruction, he offers it to be referring to a nation lost their ideological and political superiority, whereby the later he refers to the revival of that nation morally and politically, in contrast to physical rise from death claimed by others. Later he continues quoting the words of Ezekiel from the Book of Ezekiel, and with referring to different words of him, he claims these verses to be metaphorical words uttered by Ezekiel.⁹

Qur’an talks about Moses’ desire of seeing God in Q7:143. For a prophet, knowing that God cannot be observed by human eyes, to be in such desire does not suit. Muslim authors have expressed multiple views regarding the issue. Some of them, such as Baydawi (d. 1319) and Ebussud Efendi (1490-1574), expressed the view that there was a hidden request behind the desire to make him capable of seeing God, while others, such as Zamakhshari (1075-1144), saw it to be not the desire of Moses but the demand of Jews presented in the mouth of him. Akram Khan proposes the desire to be before receiving God’s revelation and learning the insusceptibility of seeing God by human eyes; therefore, no contrast should be raised against his

⁸ Khan, *Qur’an Sharif*, IV/243-44.

⁹ Khan, *Qur’an Sharif*, I/256-260.

prophethood. Again, he refers to Torah to support his theory and prove the occurrence of the event before Moses' reception of divine revelation.¹⁰

In all these cases, Akram Khan's primary concern can readily be noted to be rationality and reason. In first two cases he rejects the miraculousness of the event, where he is found to be concerned about the innocence of prophets in the third case. Both these aspects could be observed throughout his work. From Moses' exodus to Solomon's kingdom, or Adam's garden to Jesus' birth and raise to the heaven, almost every time where there is a miraculous narrative about the previous nations and their prophets, he is found to interpret the event from a more rational perspective. Not only that, he even endeavours to bring rational explanations to events took place in the lifetime of the Prophet too. For instance, he offers the word *ṭayr* (طير) in Q105:3 to be referring to poisonous insects instead of birds. While almost all Muslim scholars interpret Q105:3-4 as "For He sent against them flocks of birds, that pelted them with stones of baked clay." he takes the word *tarmīhim* (ترميمهم), as read by almost every experts, meaning "she pelts" referring to *abābīl* (أبائيل) birds in the previous verse, to be *yarmīhim* (يرميمهم), as reported to be offered by a few, meaning "he pelts", referring to God.¹¹

abābīl is a plural noun with no singular form and is considered to be feminine in gender. Therefore, accepting the verb as *tarmīhim* would necessarily mean that those birds, sent by God, pelted stones on the army of Abraha. On the other hand, accepting *yarmīhim*, which is a masculine form of verb, will prevent *abābīl* to be subject and none but God Himself will be one lapidates stone then. As in almost every miraculous cases, Akram Khan here is not ready to depict some small birds carrying stones in their mouth and claws and destroying a mighty army. So he interprets the *ṭayr* as poisonous insects from which the army of Abraha suffered a lot, and he offers God to be the stone thrower here; therefore interprets Q105:3-5 as follows-

3. For He sent against them flocks of (poisonous) insects,
4. (and He) pelted them with stones of baked clay,
5. leaving them like chewed up straw.

Similarly, every time the innocence of prophets and angels are in stake, Akram Khan offers a different, more in line with respecting the innocence of prophets and angels, interpretation. For him, to claim the innocence of prophets and angels and believing in events where they are

¹⁰ Khan, *Qur'an Sharif*, II/391-92.

¹¹ Khan, *Qur'an Sharif*, V/529-31.

portrayed to be doing wrong is inconsistent with reason. Before diving into the detailed argument, while elaborating Q2:102, Akram Khan Puts forward a bunch of Qur'anic/Islamic fundamentals, which, to him, should be protected in every situation. Two of those four fundamentals are that all the prophets are free from every kind of sin and angels never resist God's command. Later he keeps arguing that the traditional understanding of the verse is against those universal Qur'anic fundamentals, therefore need to be revised. There are six *mā* (ما) in the verse. In Arabic *mā* can refer to both negative "not/no" and relative pronoun "which/what". Such as, Akram Khan says, if *mā* in *mā kafara Sulaymān* is considered to be negative, then it will mean "Solomon did not distrust", while considering it relative pronoun would lead to the interpretation "what Solomon distrusted". A big number of traditional *mufassirs* consider the first, third, fourth and fifth *mā*, of those six found in the verse, as relative pronoun and the second and last one as negative, which necessarily lead to the interpretation that the two angel Harut and Marut taught wizardry, among which the trick of causing rift between married couples, to the people in Babylon, with the warning that they were nothing but a test for them, so they should have not fallen into that, but the Jews people ignored their warning and kept learning and practicing wizardry. This interpretation comes with a bunch of scrupulous background stories. Instead of a detailed account, let us conclude them as-

The Jews of the time of the Prophet used to practice wizardry and they claimed two sources of those magic: King Solomon used magic to establish and rule over his empire. After his death, the Jews ancestors succeed to discover and learn his magic notes. Secondly, a group of angels argued with God about the misdeed of human being that said that if they had been in their place, they would never fall into that. So, two angels named Harut and Marut were chosen and sent to Babylon characterized with the human instincts, who later fall in love with a woman and conducted a number of forbidden acts. Those two angels used to teach magic in Babylon and the Jews ancestors learned those tricks from them.

Qur'an denies the involvement of Solomon with any magic and also declares that Harut and Marut only taught magic with a warning which the Jews people ignored. Although Harut and Marut have been justified of teaching wizardry in the verse, they still are guilty of arguing with God and doing forbidden acts. Also, be it with a warning, teaching magic, something prohibited and characterized as *kufr* in the Qur'an, could not be accepted simply. Moreover, coming angels to earth bearing human characteristics is an irrational narrative too. So Akram Khan proposes

that the first and fifth *mā* here would be relative pronouns and all the second, third, fourth and last ones would be negative. Therefore, the verse would lead to the interpretation that neither any Harut-Marut had been sent to Babylon, nor did they teach any magic to anyone. By saying that he rejects all the narratives regarding the issue, and saves the reputation of angels-

“Many authors interpreted *mā* in this verse to be negative in some places and to be relative pronoun in others. By doing so, narratives composed by Jews and Persians might have been preserved, but a serious injustice had been done to the Qur’anic fundamentals stipulated in the beginning (of the discussion).”¹²

A third framework of relying on Biblical scriptures can also be noted in Akram Khan. The author often found to assist Qur’an in its characterization of Jews and Christians. Qur’an in many places articulates the notorious actions of Jews and Christians and their different characteristics. Some of them had been subject to strong criticism to be not true. For instance, Qur’an characterizes Mary as the “sister of Aaron” in Q19:28 which had been faced with severe objection from many western scholars as the two lived in different times in the history. Akram Khan offers that the phrase “sister of Aaron” does necessarily not mean that she needs to be blood-sister of Aaron, rather in can simply be interpreted as the “girl from Aaron’s family”. Then he refers to the New Testament to justify this kind of use. In the Gospel of Luke, Elizabeth has been mentioned to be the daughter of Aaron (Gospel 1:5), which refers to of her being from the descendants of Aaron.¹³

Conclusion

Biblical narratives in Qur’anic exegesis have been subject to criticism by many Muslim scholars from the beginning of the history of Qur’anic studies. While a number of exegeses had been found to accept them often, many referred to them cautiously, while some denied their credibility completely.¹⁴ Akram Khan’s primary remarks on the validity and soundness of those sources lead to assert him to be from the third group. He often not only found to reject the validity of Biblical narratives as a source of Qur’anic exegesis, but also criticized many exegeses and reporters, among them the Companions too, for reporting and accepting those narratives in their works. But a close inspection reveals that not the soundness of Biblical sources, but rationality

¹² Khan, *Qur’an Sharif*, I/114.

¹³ Khan, *Qur’an Sharif*, II/391-92.

¹⁴ Abdulhamit Birisik, “Israiliyat”, *DIA* (Istanbul: Turkey Religious Foundation Publication, 2001), XXIII/199-202.

and reason are his primary concern in rejecting their validity. Even though we put the third framework, where he found to refer to Biblical sources to support the Qur'anic assertions, aside, as to resist someone with their own words does necessarily not mean to accept the credibility of their words, the first and second frameworks show demonstrate nothing but Akram Khan's admission of the credibility of the Biblical sources. Where he denies referring to Biblical sources to interpret the Qur'anic verse in one instance, he has been found to ground his interpretation in them in other. And for obvious, it is not the soundness of the source what makes him to behave different, rather it is the reason which causes him to reject the credibility of those sources in one case, and to accept them in another. In the former instance he rejects them in favour of a more rational interpretation against a miraculous exegesis, while he relies on them in the latter case again for a more rational hermeneutics.

Bibliography

Birisik, Abdulhamit. "Israiliyat" in *DIA*, XXIII/199-202. Istanbul: Turkey Religious Foundation Publication, 2001.

Hannan, Shah Abdul. "Foreword", Selections from Akram Khan's *Tafsirul Qur'an*, 12.

Hasan, Md. Mahmudul (ed.). *Selections from Akram Khan's Tafsirul Qur'an*. Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Islamic Thought, 2009.

Khan, Akrom. *Tafsirsoho Qur'an Sharif (The Noble Qur'an with Tafsir)*. Dakka: Khosroz Kitap Mahal, 2016.