

Sūrah 108: al-Kawthar

Period of Revelation

Ibn Marduyah has cited Abdullah bin Abbas, Abdullah bin az-Zubair and Ā'isha as saying that this Sūrah is Makki. Kalbi and Muqatil also regard it as Makki, and the same is the view held by the majority of commentators. But Hasan Basri, Ikrimah, Mujahid and Qatadah regard it as Madani. Imām Suyuti in *Al-Itqan* has confirmed this same view, and Imām Nawawi in his commentary of the *Sahih* of Muslim has also preferred the same. The reason for this assumption is the tradition which traditionists of the rank of Imām Ahmad, Muslim, Abu Daud, Nasai, Ibn Abi Shaibah, Ibn al-Mundhir, Ibn Marduyah, Baihaqi and others have related from Anas bin Malik, saying: "The Holy Prophet was among us. In the meantime he dozed; then he raised his head, smiling, according to some traditions, the people asked what for he was smiling, according to others, he himself told them that a Sūrah had just been revealed to him. Then, with Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim, he recited Sūrah al-Kawthar; then he asked the people whether they knew what al-Kawthar was. When they said that God and his Messenger had the best knowledge, he said; It is a river which my Lord has granted me in Paradise." (The details follow under "Kawthar"). The basis of the reasoning from this tradition for this Sūrah's being Madani is that Anas belonged to Madinah, and his saying that this Sūrah was revealed in his presence is a proof that it was Madani.

But, in the first place, from this same Anas, Imām Ahmad, Bukhari, Muslim, Abu Da'ud, Tirmidhi and Ibn Jarir have related the traditions which say that this river of Paradise (al-Kawthar) had been shown to the Prophet on the occasion of the miraj (ascension) and everyone knows that miraj had taken place at Makkah before the Hijrah. Secondly, when during the miraj the Prophet had not only been informed of this gift of God Almighty but also shown it, there was no reason why Sūrah al-Kawthar should have been revealed at Madinah to give him the good news of it. Thirdly, if in an assembly of the Companions the Holy Prophet himself had given the news of the revelation of Sūrah al-Kawthar which Anas has mentioned in his tradition, and it meant that that Sūrah had been revealed for the first time then, it was not possible that well-informed Companions like Ā'isha, Abdullah bin Abbas and Abdullah bin Zubair should have declared this Sūrah to be a Makki revelation and most of the commentators also should have regarded it as Makki. If the matter is considered carefully, there appears to be a flaw in the tradition from Anas in that it does not say what was the subject under discussion in the assembly in which the Prophet gave the news about Sūrah al-Kawthar. It is possible that at that time the Prophet was explaining something. In the meantime he was informed by revelation that that point was further explained by Sūrah al-Kawthar, and he mentioned the same thing, saying that that Sūrah was revealed to him just then. Such incidents did take place on several occasions, on the basis of which the commentators have opined about certain verses that they were revealed twice. This second revelation, in fact, meant that the verse had been revealed earlier, but on some later occasion the Prophet's attention was invited to it by revelation for the second time. In such traditions, the mention of the revelation of a certain verse is not enough to decide whether it was revealed at Makkah or Madinah, and when precisely it was revealed.

Had this tradition of Anas not been there to cause doubt, the whole content of the Sūrah al-Kawthar by itself bears evidence that it was revealed at Makkah, and in the period when the Prophet was passing through extremely discouraging conditions.

Historical Background

Before this in Sūrahs Adh-Dhuhā and Alam Nashrah we have seen that when in the earliest phase of Prophethood the Prophet was passing through the most trying conditions when the whole nation had turned hostile, there was resistance and opposition on every side, and the Prophet and a handful of his Companions did not see any remote chance of success. God in order to console and encourage him at that time had sent down several verses. In Sūrah Adh-Dhuhā it was said: "And surely the later period (i.e. every later period) is better for you than the former period, and soon your Lord shall give you so much that you shall be well

pleased.” In Sūrah Alam Nashrah: “And We exalted your renown for you.” That is, “Though the enemies are trying to defame you throughout the country, We, on the contrary, have arranged to exalt your name and fame.” And: “The fact is that along with every hardship there is also ease.” That is, “You should not be disheartened by the severity of conditions at this time; this period of hardships will soon pass, and the period of success and victory will follow.”

Such were the conditions in which God by sending down Sūrah al-Kawthar consoled the Prophet as well as foretold the destruction of his opponents. The disbelieving Quraysh said: “Muhammad cut off from his community and reduced to a powerless and helpless individual. According to Ikrimah when the Prophet was appointed a Prophet, and he began to call the people to Islām, the Quraysh said: “Muhammad is cut off from his people as a tree is cut off from its root, which might fall to the ground any moment.” (Ibn Jarir). Muhammad bin Ishaq says: “Whenever the Prophet was mentioned before As bin Wa’il as-Sehmi, the chief of Makkah, he used to say: “Let him alone for he is only a childless man (abtar) with no male offspring. When he dies, there will be no one to remember him.” Shamir bin Atiyah says that Uqbah bin Abi Mu’ait, also used to say similar things about the Prophet (Ibn Jarir). According to Ibn Abbas, once Ka’b bin Ashraf (the Jewish chief of Madinah) came to Makkah and the Quraysh chiefs said to him: “Just see this boy, who is cut off from his people; he thinks he is superior to us, whereas we manage the Hajj, look after the Ka’bāh and water the pilgrims.” (Bazzar) Concerning this very incident Ikrimah reports that the Quraysh had used the words *as-sunbur al-munbatir min qaumi-hi* (a weak, helpless and childless man who is cut off from his people) for the Prophet. (Ibn Jarir) Ibn Sa’d and Ibn Asakir have related that Abdullah bin Abbas said; “The eldest son of the Prophet was Qasim; next to him was Zainab, next to her Abdullah and next to him three daughters, viz. Umm Kulthum, Fātimah and Ruqayyah. Of them first Qasim died and then Abdullah. Thereupon As bin Wail said: “His line has come to an end: now he is abtar (i.e. cut off from root).” Some traditions add that As said “Muhammad is abtar: he has no son to succeed him. When he dies, his memory will perish and you will be rid of him.” The tradition from Ibn Abbas, which Abd bin Humaid has related, shows that Abu Jahl also had said similar words on the death of the Prophet’s son, Abdullah. Ibn Abi Hatim has related on the authority of Shmir bin Atiyah that the same kind of meanness was shown by Uqbah bin Abi Mu’ait by rejoicing at this bereavement of the Prophet. Ata says that when the second son of the Prophet died, his own uncle, Abu Lahab (whose house was next to his) hastened to the pagans and gave them the “good news:” Batira Muhammadun al-lail: “Muhammad has become childless this night, or he is cut off from root.”

Such were the disturbing conditions under which Sūrah al-Kawthar was sent down. The Quraysh were angry with him because he worshipped and served only God and repudiated their idolatry publicly. For this very reason he was deprived of the rank, esteem and honour that he enjoyed among his people before Prophethood and was now as cut off from his community. The handful of his Companions also were helpless, poor people who were being persecuted and tyrannized. Furthermore, he was bereaved by the death of two sons, one after the other, whereas the near relatives and the people of his clan, brotherhood and neighborhood were rejoicing and uttering such words as were disheartening and disturbing for a noble person who had treated even his enemies most kindly. At this God just in one sentence of this brief Sūrah gave him the good news, better news than which has never been given to any man in the world, besides the decision that it will be his opponents who will be cut off from their root and not he.

Sūrah 108: al-Kawthar¹⁸⁶⁹

In the Name of God, the Most Compassionate,
the Most Merciful

1. Indeed, We have granted you, [O Muhammad], al-Kawthar.
2. So pray to your Lord and sacrifice [to Him alone].
3. Indeed, your enemy is the one cut off.¹⁸⁷⁰

¹⁸⁶⁹ Al-Kawthar: Literally, “the most abundant good.” Also, a river in Paradise.

¹⁸⁷⁰ From all good in this world and the Hereafter.