

ILLUMINATING THE DARKNESS

Blacks and North Africans in Islam

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Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd.

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Foreword

This is a timely work. With black people in the US beginning finally to emerge from the centuries of degrading slavery and the false start of the Civil Rights movement, and with Africa itself increasingly looking to be the continent of the future for Islam, nothing written in this area is without politics. Thus, it has been vital for orientalists, themselves often faithful servants of powerful oligarchic elements in world finance and corporatism, to back-project modern racism and the horrific history of Judaeo-Christian slavery into Islam. But make no mistake about it, this is entirely a political issue, or rather we should say an economic one, since today academia serves politics which in turn serves economics.

One should not, in defending against this attack, resort to a rose-tinted and romantic view of the history of the Muslims for, unsurprisingly, Muslims have had their tyrants, murderers, adulterers, drunks and thieves just as have others. And Muslim culture itself has suffered tremendous low-points in its cyclical history, a history which comprises an initial exuberant bursting forth, a high point with its cultural achievements, gradual decline into decadence, followed by renewal, a cycle best exemplified by Madīnah al-Munawwarah itself

and often but not exclusively illustrated by the Islam of the West and Africa in particular, of which this book has splendid examples.

The reader needs no other discrimination while reading this book than the one the author strives to make clear throughout: the *dīn* of Islam is not only free of racism but is utterly opposed to it as the most aberrant form of *jāhiliyyah* (*ignorance*). This is clear in the Qur'ān, the Sunnah and in the extensive hadith literature.

Where the book is utterly fascinating is in its vignettes of whole African civilisations and 'empires', one uses that term advisedly, that rose and sank, and the fierce resistance mounted against colonialism and its imperial projects, and also of the luminous scholars from an often forgotten tradition that sustained that history. This is a revelation of a kind for those who think of Islamic history exclusively in terms of the great Arab 'empires' of the Middle East and their long decline into decadence and finally extinction. Perhaps few things are more damaging for Muslims' sense of identity today than this spurious identification of Islamic history with that of the Arabs, who are after all, only a small percentage of the Muslims, neglecting in the process the sultanates of the Far East such as in Nusantara (Indonesia and Malaysia), the Mughals of the Indian Sub-Continent, the numerous Turkic Stans that were absorbed into the USSR, the glorious Osmanli dawlāh, and the huge and inadequately explored history of Islamic Africa. The book's extensive bibliography contains enough pointers for the reader to pursue that line of enquiry.

Just as the constituency of modern Muslim societies is clear evidence of the absence of racialism and colourism from Muslim hearts at their best, it contains then a sign for the future. Globalisation increasingly mixes peoples up all over the earth and once-subject peoples, impoverished and often made refugees by it, flee to the West. The West's own subject peoples, its indigenous peoples, are also bewildered by the modern age, misled by the media servants of high oligarchic finance. They allow their rage to be deflected from

the usurious monetary order of the age onto the flood of the bereft from the once-Third World. It is only Islam that offers a multi-racial brotherhood for the people of the future from both disadvantaged groups. Indeed, it is only Islam that has successfully allowed peoples of different races and religions to live together, as in Andalus and the Osmanli dawlah. When the Muslims themselves wake up from their slumbers and emerge from the ghettos, both physical and intellectual, that they have foolishly allowed themselves to inhabit, they will have to take their place as generous hosts of humanity in an increasingly alien and predatory age. In having given us resources for that, the author has done us a tremendous service.

Abdassamad Clarke

There have reportedly been 124,000 prophets sent by Allah to mankind. Some of these prophets are mentioned in the Qur’ān, “*There are Messengers We have already told you about and Messengers We have not told you about.*”¹ Interpreting this verse, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib ؑ said, “Allah sent a black Abyssinian as a prophet. This man was amongst those prophets whose story was not narrated to the Prophet Muḥammad ؐ (in the Qur’ān).”² This chapter looks at black prophets from the Islamic literary genre, *Qışaş al-Anbiyā* [‘Stories of the Prophets’].

The Prophet of the People of the Ditch

‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib ؑ said, “The prophet of the People of the Ditch was Abyssinian.” Ibn al-Jawzī narrates on the authority of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib ؑ: There was one of the kings who became intoxicated and then slept with his sister. When he sobered and regained consciousness he said to his sister, “Woe to you, how are we going to escape from this calamity?” She replied “Gather the people of your kingdom and inform them that Allah has permitted marriage between siblings.

¹ Sūrat an-Nisā’ 4:164.

² As-Suyūṭī, 2004, p. 19.

After the news has spread amongst the people, they will soon forget this legislation. Then summon them and forbid it.” The king followed the advice of his sister and went to the people and gave a sermon about this new legislation of the permissibility of incest. The people refused to accept the king’s edict. The king called for whips and his guards unsheathed their swords. The people still refused to accept the king’s ruling. So he dug a ditch and set it alight. The tyrannical king then threw everyone in the ditch that refused to accept his ruling. Many of the scholars of Qur’ānic exegesis said that the people who were burned in the ditch were Abyssinians.^{3,4}

Luqmān the Wise

Luqmān in the Qur’ān

We gave Luqman wisdom (ḥikmah): “Give thanks to Allah. Whoever gives thanks only does so to his own good. Whoever is ungrateful, Allah is Rich Beyond Need, Praiseworthy.” When Luqman said to his son, counselling him, “My son, do not associate anything with Allah. Associating others with Him is a terrible wrong.” We have instructed man concerning his parents. Bearing him caused his mother great debility and the period of his weaning was two years: “Give thanks to Me and to your parents. I am your final destination. But if they try to make you associate something with Me about which you have no knowledge, do not obey them. Keep company with them correctly and courteously in this world but follow the Way of him who turns to Me.

³ Ibn al-Jawzī, 1998, p. 83, Sūrat al-Burūj 85: 5-9.

⁴ There are four interpretations of the story, two of which may be the same: 1. The story told by the Messenger of Allah ﷺ about the king whose people became ‘Muslims’ and who he burnt alive; 2. The king who slept with his sister; 3. The Abyssinian followers of an Abyssinian prophet; and 4. Dhu Nuwas, the king of Yemen who became a Jew. This last may agree with the first.

The story of the king who committed incest does not mention Abyssinians or a prophet - Ed.

Then you will return to Me and I will inform you about the things you did.” “My son, even if something weighs as little as a mustard-seed and is inside a rock or anywhere else in the heavens or earth, Allah will bring it out. Allah is All-Pervading, All-Aware. My son, establish ṣalāh and command what is right and forbid what is wrong and be steadfast in the face of all that happens to you. That is certainly the most resolute course to follow. Do not avert your face from people out of haughtiness and do not strut about arrogantly on the earth. Allah does not love anyone who is vain or boastful. Be moderate in your tread and lower your voice. The most hateful of voices is the donkey’s bray.”⁵

Luqmān’s Status

Mujāhid interpreted the word *ḥikmah* in the Qur’ānic verse, “We gave Luqman wisdom (*ḥikmah*)” to mean *fiqh* (a deep understanding of the religion), *‘aql* (strong intelligence) and *iṣābah* (hitting the mark). ‘Ikrimah, As-Sa’dī and Ash-Sha’bī interpreted *ḥikmah* to mean *nubuwwah* (prophethood). Ibn al-Jawzī said, “There is a difference of opinion amongst the *‘ulamā’* regarding Luqmān’s status and as to whether he was a prophet. The majority say that he was a pious sage and not a prophet. However, Companions and early religious scholars such as ‘Ikrimah ibn Abī Jaḥl, Al-Layth ibn Sa’d and Sa’id ibn al-Musayyib were of the opinion that Luqmān was indeed a prophet.⁶

As-Suyūṭī relates on the authority of ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān ibn Yazīd ibn Jābir that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “The masters of as-Sūdān (blacks) are four: Luqmān the Abyssinian, the Negus, Bilāl and Muḥja’.”⁷ Ibn ‘Abbās said, “Luqmān was an Abyssinian servant who

⁵ Sūrah Luqmān 31:12-19.

⁶ Ibn al-Jawzī, 1998, p. 97.

⁷ “Ibn ‘Asākir narrated it from ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān ibn Yazīd ibn Jābir as a *mursal hadith*. Ibn ‘Asākir vol. 10:462.” As-Suyūṭī, *Jam’ al-Jawāmi’*. Al-Ḥākim narrates it without mention of the Negus in *dhikr Bilāl ibn Rabāh mu’adhdhin Rasūlillāh ṣalla’llāhu ‘alayhi wa sallama*, No. 5242. He declared it *ṣaḥīḥ*.