

Ibn Hazm on the Role of Human Reasoning in Accepting “*Al-Khabar*”: With Special Reference to Selected Qur’anic Verses and Gospel Narratives on ‘*Isa* (p.b.u.h.)

Majdan Alias

Department of Usuluddin and Comparative Religion
Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences,
International Islamic University Malaysia
Tel: +60175569546 Email: majdan@iium.edu.my

Abstract

This paper examines Ibn Hazm’s position on the role of human reasoning in judging the reliability and validity of news (*al-khabar*). Quranic verses and Gospel narratives on the manner of the end of the life of prophet ‘*Isa* (p.b.u.h.), which is at the root of variance between Islam and Christianity, were looked into, and focus was be given to Ibn Hazm’s stance and understanding of these verses and narratives. The study is based on textual analysis of Ibn Hazm’s interpretation of the Quranic phrase “*shubbiha lahum*” which Ibn Hazm offers in his *al-Fasl*, and his critiques of the Good Friday narratives, which he offers in the same work. The study finds that Ibn Hazm’s position on the meaning of “*shubbiha lahum*” is directly connected to his attitude towards all reports on religions, particularly the scriptures.

Keywords: Quran, Gospels, *shubbiha lahum*, theory of Substitution, human’s senses.

Introduction

In dealing with the Quranic verses on religions other than Islam, Muslim Scholars adopt several methodologies, basically in line with their exegesis of other verses of the Qur’an. Some scholars rely solely on the literal meaning of the scripture. They view that since the scripture is sent to human being and God who is the sole author of the scripture knows the best way of addressing the human mind. What is meant by the scripture must always be the direct literal meaning. Some others have the conviction that human’s intellect is the means that God bestowed upon mankind to guide them in life, hence human’s reasoning plays significant role in interpreting the Quranic verses. There is no contradiction between revelation and reason, provided that human’s intellect has reached maturity. This group of scholars can be further classified into different categories, based on the different degrees in their usage of logic, and that is beyond the scope of this research. The study will examine Ibn Hazm’s interpretation of the Quranic verses on the end of the life of ‘*Isa* (p.b.u.h.), and to find out Ibn Hazm’s methodology in dealing with these verses and the interconnectivity between his interpretation of these verses and his standpoint on reports about religions, particularly the scriptures.

Quranic Exposition of the Crucifixion

The events of the final moments in the life of ‘*Isa* (p.b.u.h.) on earth is seen by the Christians as the cardinal events that explain the Christian outlook over the universe, life and man. It is out of the belief that ‘*Isa* (p.b.u.h.) was crucified, killed, buried and on the third

day rose again that the Christians grounded their faith in the divine plan for human salvation, which presupposes God's own presence within His beloved people. Thus, the "resurrection" has to be considered a miracle and to be so considered, the one crucified, killed, buried and resurrected has to be confirmed as "truly Jesus", and this fact, according to the Christians, is confirmed by the writers of the four gospels in their reports.

The Muslims, in contrast, are faithful to the Quranic claim that 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) was neither crucified, nor killed.

"Yet they slew him not and they crucified him not, but it was an illusion for them, and they who hold different views in this matter were not definite about it." (Al-Quran, 4:157)

By subscribing to the Quranic claim, a wide gulf between the Muslim understanding and that of the Christians will certainly be unavoidable. Two important points should be considered. First, no Muslim will accept the Christian claim that 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) was crucified or killed. Second, and more significantly, by adhering to a pure monotheistic faith, a Muslim will never accept the Christian belief which is derived from their conviction that 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) was crucified, killed and resurrected, that 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) is co-eternal with God, and all the sufferings that he undertook were for the purpose of human's salvation.

Interestingly, in the chapter Al'Imran (Al-Quran, 3:55), God describes his message to 'Isa (p.b.u.h.), '*inni mutawaffika*' - "I am sending you to death," which sounds contradictory to the verse in the chapter al-Nisa' previously mentioned... "yet they slew him not and they crucified him not..." According to many of the Quranic commenters, since 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) was not crucified nor killed by the Jews, the phrase "I am sending you to death", should not mean a death as a result of 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) being killed or crucified. In his *Mafatih al-Ghayib*, the prominent Asharite scholar, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi suggests several interpretations to avoid the two verses to be seen contradicting. Generally, these interpretations can be summarized into two. The first interpretation is grounded in the total reliance on the literal meaning of the verse. Thus, the meaning of *inni mutawaffika* must be no other than "God is sending 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) into death". However different opinions can be seen as regard to the exact time when the death took place. According to al-Razi, some interpreters viewed that the death had already occurred before the event of "crucifixion" took place. When the Roman soldiers wanted to assassinate 'Isa (p.b.u.h.), God brought 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) into death and lifted him to heaven. Some others allowed a wider range of time; that is, deaths of some other time before or after the event of "crucifixion", as long as the interpretations do not associate the death with 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) being crucified. The second interpretation did not take the phrase "*inni mutawaffika*" in the chapter al-Nisa' in its literal sense. Since the verse in Al 'Imran denies the death of 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) as the result of crucifixion or killing, the verse in al-Nisa' should not be understood as "real death", but "death of the desire", or it means that "God grasped 'Isa (p.b.u.h.)" – *al-qabd*, and God ended his job. Thus, the term *mutawaffika* means *mutawaffi 'amaluk* – to end your job (Al-Razi, 1990).

Ibn Hazm's Position on the Theory of Substitution

Thus, it becomes clear that the Quran denies that 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) died or killed on the cross. The problem that crops up at this juncture is that how do Muslims argue against the reports of the gospels; particularly the four gospels; which insist that 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) was crucified and had met his death on the cross.

In the Muslim circle, several ways of explaining that important event of the Christian thought were developed. The key concept in their interpretation is the phrase *shubbiha lahum* in the chapter Al 'Imran previously mentioned, which means "it was an illusion for them". The event that took place on the Friday evening, which is believed by the Christians and the Jews to be the crucifixion of 'Isa (p.b.u.h.), is described by the Quran, and thus the Muslims as an "illusion"; that is; to many Quran interpreters; a substitute was made in place of 'Isa (p.b.u.h.), and it was that person who was killed and not 'Isa (p.b.u.h.). This theory of Substitution is subscribed by Mujahid, Ibn Kathir, al-Thalabi and al-Maqrizi, and among modern interpreters Rashid Rida believed in this theory (Ibn Kathir, 1990).

Among the possible ways of explaining what really happened during that event, al-Razi (who does not subscribe to this theory) presents three views among the Quran interpreters. The first view according to al-Razi says that when the Jews decided for the assassination of 'Isa (p.b.u.h.), Gabriel (p.b.u.h.) directed 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) to enter a house that had a window, and when 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) entered the house, Gabriel (p.b.u.h.) took 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) out through the window. However, before that Gabriel had transformed someone to look like 'Isa (p.b.u.h.), and the man was taken and crucified (Al-Razi, 1990). The second view says that before the Jews got 'Isa (p.b.u.h.), 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) was in the house of a hypocrite, who presented himself as one of his twelve disciples. The man revealed to the Jews 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) among them. God threw the illusion of 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) on that man and lifted 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) to the heaven. That man was then taken by the Jews and was crucified (Al-Razi, 1990). The third view says that after knowing that the Jews were setting a conspiracy to assassinate him, 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) asked ten of his disciples, which one of them would buy heaven by bearing the illusion of 'Isa (p.b.u.h.). One of them agreed and God lifted 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) up to the heaven (Al-Razi, 1990).

Reports on Religion

Even though the theory of Substitution seems to be able to explain the Quranic claim of *shubbiha lahum*, this theory means that human senses are subjected to errors. At this juncture, the Zahiri scholar, Ibn azm finds that if senses which are the backbone of reports on human actions can be deceived, then there can be no truth (Ibn Hazm, 1982). Speaking about religion, whose most important element is God's message to human communities, human reports which are based on human's senses act as the foundation of human's knowledge of God and His message. If the senses themselves can be deceived then all truths would be nothing more than speculations. Everyone can be deceived in every aspect of his life; food, clothing, identity, etc. (Ibn Hazm, 1982). With regard to the issue of God's throwing the illusion of 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) to someone else, this interpretation will open the door to sophisticism and it will end up with the refutation of law, because nothing can be considered real. By accepting the notion of error in vision, one is actually granting the denial of successive reports (*khabar al-mutawatir*), and this opens the door to the denial of the notion of prophethood (Al-Razi, 1990). It seems that Ibn Hazm was fully aware of the debate between the Caliph al-Mahdi and the Christian bishop Timothy, where al-Mahdi pressed the text that God made a similitude and it is this to which the Quran refers. Timothy asked whether God was a deceiver, and if this was the case, then the disciples of 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) were not to be blamed if they reported what God intended them to see (Sweetman, 1955).

Having this in mind, Ibn Hazm, realizes the difficulties that might occur in subscribing to the theory of Substitution. The same position was later on adopted by al-Razi. According to

al-Razi, who adopts the view of the *mutakallimin*, when the Jews wanted to kill 'Isa (p.b.u.h.), God lifted 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) to heaven. The Jews, fear of the sedition that might occur among the layman, they thus took a man and crucified him, and people thought that the man was 'Isa (p.b.u.h.), for most people did not know 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) except by name because he rarely mixed with the people (Ibn Hazm, 1982 and Al-Razi, 1990). Thus *shubbiha* in Ibn Hazm's scheme of exegesis refers to the Jews as conscious agents of deception (Ibn Hazm, 1982). and they were far from being the victims of it as claimed by some other Muslim interpreters (Ibn Hazm, 1982). Ibn Hazm concludes:

“Thus it becomes clear that the event of the crucifixion has been reported by people who must insult unease and distrust in those who hear their reports. How can it be said that the crucifixion was transmitted by the masses? This is the meaning God's saying “but it was counterfeited for them”, God means the unfaithful who connived at this falsehood, and then deceived those imitated them, and who said “we killed and crucified 'Isa (p.b.u.h.), when they knowingly lied” (Ibn Hazm, 1982).

Ibn Hazm's position of not accepting the theory of Substitution is grounded in his belief that human senses are reliable instruments in conveying reports. For that reason God warns human beings that they are answerable in front of God due to this faculty that God has endowed in them.

“and pursue not that of which thou hast no knowledge; for every act of hearing or of seeing or of (feeling in) the heart will be enquired into (on the day of Reckoning)” (Al-Quran: 17:36).

Furthermore, it should be clear that Islam sees prophethood as the ground that the religion is based upon, and that prophethood can only be justified through reports whose means is no other than human senses. If one doubts the ability of human senses, then prophethood and the Quran as the prophetic claim, *ipso facto*, lost their authenticity as the revelation from God. The Quran and the whole bulk of the prophetic tradition are nothing but speculations and they probably be illusions.

The Test of Authenticity

Thus, human senses can be relied upon when reporting events. However, one must admit that there is no doubt that, there are times when human senses may be deceived, and thus the reports may be illusions. There are also times when man due to certain interest may have lied in their reports, and sometimes human beings unintentionally make mistake in their reports. In the Islamic circle, it is well known that Muslim scholars give two categories to reports: successive reports and single reports. As regard to the successive reports, they are acceptable, since human senses can be relied upon, provided that the possibility of any conspiracy can be denied. With regard to the single reports, their authenticity is to be examined by undergoing a test on the transmitters of the reports. First, the transmitters must be investigated in two major aspects: the test of conduct, to see whether they were people who followed the conducts mentioned by the Quran and the sunnah. Second, the test of memory, that is to see whether the transmitters were people who had the ability of memorizing, or otherwise. Only reports transmitted through this mode of transmission can be labeled “authentic”.

The Quran and the Sunnah

A cursory reading of Ibn Hazm's analysis of Judaism and Christianity will be able to notice that Ibn Hazm gives specific interest to the study of the scriptures of these religions. In this regard, it can be deduced that Ibn Hazm had in his conviction that since religious scriptures are the message that God conveyed to human beings, to study a religion, it is essential that one pours his attention to the scripture of the religion. As a Muslim, Ibn Hazm believes that God had communicated with Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), through the Quran. As the Quran is transmitted by Muhammad from Gabriel, and then from Muhammad to the companions through a consensus of transmitters (*al-Ijma'*) or successive reporters (*naql al-kaffah*), the Quran, thus, is an authentic revelation of God. Here, it is important to state that, the knowledge possessed by of the reporters of the Quran is solely based on eyewitness reports. Thus, it becomes evident that Ibn Hazm's interpretation of the term *shubbiha*, as the Jews to be the agent of the deception, is a ground established by Ibn Hazm to support his and his fellow Muslims' claim when they say and believe that the Quran is a genuine book of God. Granting the denial of these reports, due to the possibility of human senses to be deceived will result into the denial of successive reports on religion, i.e the Quran.

The Gospel Narratives: the Problem of Interruption

Being objective in his study of the gospels, Ibn Hazm shows his impartial attitude towards the gospel narratives by admitting that they basically can be considered as religious reports since they are based on eyewitness. To ensure the authenticity of these narratives, the gospels have to go through the test of authenticity that is done to the Quran. Ibn Hazm here questions the integrity of the transmitters of the Gospels. This approach is actually one of the foundations of Ibn Hazm's critiques of the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Taking the Good Friday narratives as examples, Ibn Hazm finds that the first witnesses of the Good Friday narratives were the Roman soldiers, who, according to Ibn Hazm were a corruptible set of witnesses. Matthew 28: 11-15 reports that they accepted a big amount of money from the Sanhedrin to publish the false account saying that the disciples of 'Isa (p.b.u.h.) came at night and stole the body while the Roman soldiers were asleep.

"Now when they were going, behold, some of the watch came into the city, and showed unto the chief priests all the things that were done. And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers, saying, say ye, his disciples came by night, and stole him *away* while we slept. And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will persuade him, and secure you. So they took the money, and did as they were taught: and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day."

Matthew's aforementioned report, according to Ibn Hazm, confirms that the soldiers were willing to lie in their reports in return of a bribe. Thus, according to Ibn Hazm, the authenticity of the Good Friday narratives is questionable as the report of the event was surrounded by corrupt and false atmosphere (Ibn Hazm. 1982). Furthermore, Ibn Hazm's citation of Matthew 28 can also be seen in the light of Ibn Hazm's interpretation of the phrase *shubbiha lahum* mentioned earlier, for Matthew 28 is actually confirming the charge of being a conscious agent of deception that Ibn Hazm threw on the Jews, since the elders among the Jews were willing to bribe in return of issuing false news.

There are other points mentioned by Ibn Hazm that proof the charge of interruption he posed on the gospel reports. The crucifixion took place at a place far away from the city, and this

was not the usual practice for public execution in the Roman tradition, and if one considers this fact, then one should be certain that the number of witnesses of this event was small (See: Ibn Hazm, 1985).

Furthermore, according to Ibn Hazm, the behavior of the disciples also contributed to the uncertainty of the witnesses. Mary Magdalene moved in anxiety, Peter slipped away to the house of the chief priest where he avoided declaring his name (Ibn Hazm, 1982, Bultmann, 1951). Likewise, Mary Magdalene who watched the event from distance added to the fact that the event of crucifixion was reported by only a small number. At this, point, Ibn Hazm compares this issue to his personal experience when al-Mahdi declared that the death of caliph Hisham al-Mu'ayyid (822-852C.E.), when it was actually an impostor who was being prayed to. Ibn Hazm mentions that Ibn Zakwan, the judge of Cordoba was among those who washed the funeral (Ibn Hazm, 1982).

Human Being: the Ability and the Limitations

In light of Ibn Hazm's denial of the theory of Substitution, particularly when Ibn Hazm mentions the dialogue between al-Mahdi and the bishop Timothy mentioned earlier, one may see how Ibn Hazm is relating his interpretation with the role of prophethood and its relationship with human's responsibility. If senses cannot be relied upon, human's judgment should not be the ground for responsibility.

On the other side of the coin, the ability of human senses should be seen as subject to certain limitations, and everyone, as long as he or she falls under the realm of human being should be seen as fallible beings.

“Every son of Adam is a sinner, and the best of sinners are those who repent”.

Here, we are coming to another concept in Ibn Hazm's attitude towards religious reports, that is, the transmitters of the reports were far from being infallible as the Christians claim in the transmitters of the Gospels. An example from Ibn Hazm's own citations from the Gospels in the *al-Fasl* may clarify his stance. Ibn Hazm finds that the four Gospels have contradicting reports regarding the persons who came to the tomb and found that the stone had been removed from its place, and these variances should not have happened if the transmitters of the Gospels were infallibles. Matthew, according to Ibn Hazm, narrates that Mary Magdalena and Mary came to the tomb, whereas Mark, in Ibn Hazm's citation, views that they were three: the two Marys and Salome. As for Luke, Ibn Hazm finds that Luke narrates that “women” came to the tomb but does not specify their names. According to Bultmann (1951), the reason for Luke's omitting of the names of the “women” is that Luke has already stated earlier in his report, who the Galilean were, And regarding John, Ibn Hazm says that he reports that it was Mary alone at the tomb. Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:1, Luke 24:10 and John 20:1

Thus, to judge the authenticity of the gospels, one must take them as reports made by fallible human beings. The authenticity of these reports must be understood by human beings, whose judgment is grounded in human's own capacity of using the intellectual faculty that is at work within every sane human being.

Ibn Hazm's Position on the Gospels

Since human senses can be reliable for reports if the senses fulfill certain criterions, and since the transmitters of the reports were humans who were not infallible and probably fall into mistakes, and thus, transmitting false reports, Ibn Hazm thus, examines the authenticity of the Gospel narratives. Ibn Hazm finds that the gospels were not transmitted through successive narrators. They came down to the Christians through only three agents: they were Paul, Mark and Luke. These three in addition, reported only from five of the apostles: Peter, Matthew, John, James and Jude. Ibn Hazm points out that two of the gospel writers were among the apostles, and the other two were among the followers of the apostles. Only Matthew and John were among the apostles. Mark and Luke were followers of Paul and Peter respectively (Abu Laylah, 1998).

Furthermore, according to Ibn Hazm, Paul says that he was with Peter only for fifteen days, (Ibn Hazm, 1982) when they first met, and their next meeting only occupied a short time. The third time they met, they were crucified. Since the number of transmitters was small, and admitting that human senses may fall into mistake, Ibn Hazm's position towards these Gospels is that they are not authentic as religious scriptures. The transmission of reports faced several interruptions.

As regard to the Good Friday narratives, here is an example where Ibn Hazm cites from the Gospels to show that these narratives are not authentic. Concerning 'Isa (p.b.u.h.)' death, Ibn Hazm goes very deep into the discussion by studying the narratives of the Gospels on 'Isa (p.b.u.h.)' own prophecy of his death. He quotes the synoptic traditions: Matthew 16:21, Mark 9:31-34 and Luke 18: 31-34. Here, Ibn Hazm directs his attention to the distinction between the terms "killed" and "crucified". "Killed" indicates death resulting from external agents imposed on the victims. "Crucifixion" is just a way of punishment, not necessarily resulting in the death of the victim. If this takes place, the death is said to have been the result of natural causes such as the victim being subjected to environmental changes, such as cold, heat, wind, hunger and thirst (Sweetman, 1955, Abu Laylah, 1998). From the verses mentioned above, Ibn Hazm finds that 'Isa (p.b.u.h.)' prophecy is that he would be "killed". The four Gospels by contrast, according to Ibn Hazm, maintain that 'Isa (p.b.u.h.)' was not killed, but crucified. His death was not the result of an external act imposed on him, but it was out of some natural causes during the crucifixion. From Ibn Hazm's point of view, this contradiction should not happen in the Gospel narratives, and this shows that the narrators were not infallible, Ibn Hazm says: "This is a great mistake, and God forbade prophets to tell lies or to make false statements. This is a sign of a liar" (Ibn Hazm, 1982).

Conclusion

In light of the phrase "*shubbiha lahum*" and Ibn Hazm's interpretation of the phrase; i.e. that the Jewish rabbis were the conscious agents of deception, differing from other interpreters who see God as the one that threw the illusion of 'Isa (p.b.u.h.)' on someone else; one can understand the structure of Ibn Hazm's attitude towards religious reports. In Ibn Hazm's scheme, one has to admit that human beings are endowed with the intellectual faculty and all the necessary tools in order that human beings know the truth. Human beings, by this faculty which is endowed in him, have the ability to know and to judge the true from the false, the true God's commands from man made statements. Hence, man is said to be answerable before God for his deeds and actions.

Based on his conviction that human's reasoning is reliable instrument for judging the reliability and validity of news (*al-khabar*), Ibn Hazm further offers a fundamental criterion for accepting *al-khabar*, which is "the successive conveyance of news" (*al-tawatur*).

References

The Holy Quran.

Abu Laylah, Muhammad, (1998) *The Qur'an and the Gospels, A Comparative Study, Second Edition* (Cairo: El-Falah for Translation, Publishing and Distribution).

Al-Razi, Fakhr al-Din Muhammad ibn 'Umar ibn al-Hasan, (1990). *Al-Tafsir al-Kabir aw Mafatih al-Ghaib* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah).

Bultmann, Rudolf, (1951). *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons).

Ibn Hazm al-Andalusi, Abu Muhammad 'Ali ibn Ahmad, (1982). *Al-Fasl fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwa' wa al-Ni'at*, vol.1 (Jeddah: Sharika Maktabat 'AkaḌ).

Ibn Hazm al-Andalusi, Abu Muhammad 'Ali ibn Ahmad, (1985). *Al-Ihkam fi Usul al-Ahkam* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah).

Ibn Kathir, Abu al-Fida' Isma'il, (1990). *Tafsir al-Quran al-'Adhim*. Beirut: Dar al-Jil.

Kamaruzaman, Kamar Oniah, (2003). *Early Muslim Scholarship in Religionswissenschaft* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, IIUM)

Siddiqi, Mazheruddin, (1965). *The Quranic Concept of History*. Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute.

Sweetman, D.D., J.Windrow, (1955). *Islam and Christian Theology, A Study of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, (London:Lutterworth Press).

The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (1993). London: Geoffrey Chapman,

Yusof Ali, A., (1975). *The Holy Quran, Text, Translation and Commentary* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation).