

Truth-Making in Early Islam

By Elias Saba

When Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* was published in 1988, the book both garnered praise and stirred a political controversy. Yet it did not invent anything as it relied on the very well documented 'Satanic Verses incident'. Addressing this infamous historical episode, Shahab Ahmed's work investigates how different interpretive methodologies can quarrel over what constitutes truth and how to make a truth-claim.

Reviewed: Shahab Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam*, Harvard UP, 2017, 352 p.

The Satanic Verses incident has become one of the most infamous episodes in early Islamic history. Although it was only of relatively minor importance in the Islamic heritage, this incident became infamous worldwide through the scandal brought about by Salman Rushdie's 1988 book, *The Satanic Verses*. This magical realist novel was at once a critical success and a political controversy. A finalist for the Man Booker Prize, the book was banned in several countries for its supposedly offensive and heretical discussion of the Prophet Muhammad. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini found the book sufficiently heretical to call for the death penalty against Rushdie. The infamy of this affair only heightened the popularity of the book and raised the public's awareness of Rushdie's novel. Lost in this debate, however, was the historical memory of the Satanic Verses incident. It was, after all, not a daring

invention by Salman Rushdie, but rather a documented and debated incident recounted in Arabic historical sources.¹

Shahab Ahmed's book, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam*, is an attempt to document and discuss all of the historical reports surrounding this now-infamous incident. Ahmed is less concerned with the Salman Rushdie affair than he is with the way in which this event was remembered and the way its historical reception shifted over time. Using the Satanic Verses incident as a case study, Ahmed's study is a wonderfully detailed demonstration of truth creation and the impact that a developing religious orthodoxy has on the genesis and understanding of truth.

Stories and Memories

The bulk of Ahmed's book consists of his collection and analysis of all fifty recorded traditions of the Satanic Verses incident. These reports differ greatly in the narrative elements they emphasize and in some of the details surrounding the event. Generally, however, they agree as to the broad outlines of what happened. One day, the Prophet Muhammad was sitting with a small group of believers and a larger group of polytheists from his own tribe, the Quraysh. At this time, tensions seemed to be running particularly high between Muhammad and the Quraysh. Muhammad was praying aloud to this group and reciting the fifty-third sura of the Qur'an, The Star. When he reached the twentieth verse of this sura, which contains a condemnation of Allat, al-'Uzza, and Manat, the three deities worshipped by the Quraysh, two verses were added to his recitation by Satanic suggestion. "Those high *gharāniq* [deities]! Indeed their intercession is to be hoped for!" (60). This approbation of the ancestral religion of the Quraysh won their approval and confused the believers. The narratives disagree about the details of what happened afterwards, but eventually Muhammad became aware of the calamity that had happened—he had recited Satan's words alongside those of God—and was aghast. Shortly thereafter God revealed verses 21-26 of this sura, which abrogated the content of the Satanic Verses and verse 52 of sura 22 The Hajj, which states that Satan had attempted to corrupt the revelation of all of the prophets sent by God (53-71).

Ahmed's analysis of the historical record is quite insightful. He groups together the fifty narratives based on the original transmitter of the story and discusses them in these groups. Ahmed compares different versions of the story attributed to the same individual as a way of attempting to date these traditions. Throughout the book, Ahmed makes convincing claims that many of these traditions plausibly date from the late seventh/early eighth century CE (264). The comparisons that Ahmed makes are based on agreement or disagreement over specific details contained in each account. Intriguingly, most of the accounts state that Muhammad himself, while influenced by Satan, uttered the Satanic verses. Only two of them

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jan/11/salman-rushdie-satanic-verses>

maintain that the verses were heard by the audience but not actually spoken by Muhammad himself.

The Formation of Truth

Why compare over fifty versions of the Satanic Verses incident? It appears that the early Muslim community, from the time of Muhammad until one or two centuries after, had no qualms about accepting the incident as truth. Only later, once both a doctrinal orthodoxy around the infallibility of the Prophet Muhammad had been established, and the discipline of hadith, a particular method of understanding and transmitting the words and actions of the Prophet, had been formed, that the narrative of the Satanic Verses began to be questioned. The process of questioning the truth, based on both doctrinal and epistemological grounds, was slow but effective. Indeed, today the truth of this incident is “universally rejected by Muslims of *all* sects and interpretative communities” (2).

This radical shift in the attitudes towards the Satanic Verses incident leads Ahmed to ask, “how does truth happen?” (3). His investigations in this regard are particularly insightful for understanding how different interpretive methodologies can quarrel over what constitutes truth and how to make a truth-claim. The communities that believed in the veracity of the Satanic Verses incident were made up primarily of scholars documenting the biography of the Prophet Muhammad or writing quranic commentaries. Both of these projects, Ahmed argues, should be understood as cultural endeavors interested in establishing particular truths. Specifically, efforts at crafting the biography of Muhammad were interested in creating a compelling dramatic story, the main character of which was the Prophet Muhammad, an outcast orphan chosen by God to lead humanity to salvation (272). From this vantage point, Satan’s unsuccessful attempts to derail this heroic journey serve as a crucial moment of drama in the saga of Muhammad’s journey. In a similar way, this story was of great use for the interpretation of the Qur’an. The story provides key context for the revelation of various verses in the Quran. In addition, the story of Muhammad’s near acceptance of the temptation of Satan parallels the stories of many of the other Prophets mentioned in the Qur’an (285-86). For scholars engaged in documenting Muhammad’s biography and Quranic commentary, the story of the Satanic Verses was not a black mark in the history of Muhammad, but rather an important and central part of Muhammad’s prophetic journey.

As noted above, after the first two centuries of Islam the Satanic Verses incident became problematic. It was at this time that the compilation of Prophetic traditions had become an active and vigorous scholarly discipline. For scholars interested in Prophetic traditions, Muhammad’s role as a role model for the community was paramount. Accordingly, the idea that Muhammad could have fallen prey to the advances of Satan was a rebuttal of the most basic tenets of Prophetic authority (268). The study of Prophetic traditions developed

new epistemic methodologies. Here, the reputation and authority of those transmitting a particular Prophetic tradition was of prime importance, not the content of the report itself. By this metric, most of the reports of the Satanic Verses could be dismissed, since most of the transmitters were of dubious authority. The status of most of these transmitters as biographers or commentators, however, was enough to cloud their authority as conveyers of sound tradition. As the discipline of hadith became more prominent, and as it grew close links with the development of Islamic law, the Satanic Verses incidence stopped being a point of high-drama in Muhammad's epic journey, but rather an aberrant moment of Prophetic indiscretion.

Truth and Orthodoxy

For Ahmed, the dynamics between these three cultural projects—biography, quranic commentary, and hadith—explain the shifting stances towards the Satanic Verses incident. These three cultural projects were not only interested in establishing truth, but also played a critical role in developing Islamic orthodoxy. The usefulness of this narrative to biographers of Muhammad and quranic commentators made the Satanic Verses an integral part of early orthodoxy; Muhammad's temptation and ultimate rejection of Satan were part and parcel of his prophetic mission. Indeed, the ultimate rejection and abrogation of these verses were seen as an affirmation of the truth of Islam and Muhammad's message. God would not allow Satan's interventions to go unaddressed. These three elements went hand-in-hand. This incident was useful, therefore it could be accepted as true, and was utilized to reinforce a particular orthodoxy.

The importance of Prophetic traditions changed all of this. Concomitant with the idea of the Prophet Muhammad as a paragon for human behavior, these scholars developed a theory of the infallibility of the prophets. If Muhammad's actions serve as models for Muslim behavior, it cannot be the case that he would have mistaken Satan's whispers for actual divine revelation. Here, the Satanic Verses undermine the cultural project. If Muhammad even once acted at the behest of Satan, there cannot be total certainty about the exemplary value of any of Muhammad's actions. Once the idea of following Prophetic practice took over, about two hundred years into the history of Islam, not only was the veracity of incident questioned, it was an affront to the accepted dogma about Prophetic infallibility.

Ahmed's book, therefore, succeeds on two levels. On the one hand, his arguments show that this incident was at one time unproblematic and widely accepted by Muslims. He demonstrates the ways and means by which this near-unanimity in favor of the Satanic Verses incident turned into a near-universal disavowal of the historicity and orthodoxy of this story. At the same time, Ahmed shows how one society negotiated and created truth and how ideas of truth-creation are so clearly a consequence of religious and political dogma.

Published in *Books & Ideas*, 7 December 2017.