

Nuzul al-Quran

By Noraini M. Noor and Aziuddin Ahmad

The term *nuzul* is derived from the root *nazala*, n-z-l (نزل) —translated as descent, usually in reference to the descent of the Quran—*Nuzul al-Quran*. Closely related to this is another kind of descent, *tanazzul* or the descent of Being, also derived from the same root verb. In contrast to the former, this latter descent is less familiar to many. But for *Nuzul al-Quran* to take place, it has to be preceded by the descent of Being or *Tanazzul*—the particular manner the One Being of God manifests or makes Itself known from complete inwardness (*al-Abad*—at the level of His Essence, *tanzih*, Oneness) to outward manifestation (*al-Wahid*—at the level of creation, *tasbbih*, multiplicity). From this understanding, for the descent to occur, there is already a connotation of something ‘sent or brought down’ (*tanzil* also derives from the root verb *nazala*) from a higher world to a lower world, implying the existence of several worlds. Hence, the sending down is from the celestial concealed world (*‘alam al-Ghayb*) to the witnessed world of the *dunyā*. Both aspects of the descent occurs beyond time and space, so an understanding of the reality of time is needed as it is the link that connects the One Being of God and the apparent multiplicity of this witnessed world.¹ For God is the ground of all being, and everything that exists can only exist because it is an aspect of that Divine Reality, hence an aspect of Divine Unity itself.

In the history of Islam, there have been many explanations of *Nuzul al-Quran*. In the usual understanding, the descent is described as taking place in two stages. The first was an instantaneous descent from its

¹ This is what *tauhid* entails—the interconnectedness of creations and its dependence on God.

heavenly origin or *al-Lawh al-Mahfuz* ('the well-guarded Tablet' or 'the Preserved Tablet,' Q85:22) to this world of the *dunyā* on the Night of Power (*laylat al-qadr*), while the second was the piecemeal revelation to Prophet Muhammad (*saw*)² by the angel Gabriel over a period of 23 years.

Muslims believe that the revelation is God's Word, and they regard the contexts of the revelation as important. As the circumstances of revelation are unique, an understanding of how it was received and understood by the Prophet, how the descent occurred into his 'heart'—that invisible human-divine reality the Qur'an calls the *qalb*—and how it was later received by his contemporaries, are crucial. So, to understand the Quran and to grasp its spirit correctly, to feel and hear it as the Arabs did at the time it was revealed, we need to go back in time to understand their culture and their language.

We will begin this study by considering some aspects of the cultural milieu of Arabs at the time, the peculiarities of Arabic language and thought, oral tradition versus written words, and the distinction between the Quran as a recitation and a *mushaf* or codex, the Invisible Reality (*ālam al-Ghayb*) and the notions of Time and Space, notably that of Time.

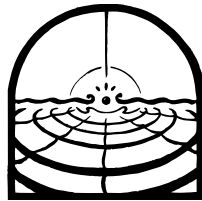
After that, we will consider *nuzul* al-Quran, or descent of the revelation from God to Muhammad via the angel Gabriel as well as Muhammad himself—the prophet who was both the medium and the message from God to humanity. Inherent in *nuzul* also is the understanding of its message, and the way the Quran puts its stories together to be presented to its listeners.

The Cultural Milieu of the Pre-Islamic Arabs

To understand the Quran and its spirit correctly, one needs to grasp it the way the Arabs of that time did, for it was addressed to them in their tongue (Q26:192-195—'And Truly it is a revelation of the Lord of the worlds, brought down by the Trustworthy Spirit, upon thine heart—that thou mayest be among the warners—in a clear, Arabic tongue'). Thus, a

² Whenever the name of the Beloved Prophet is mentioned in this study, the reader should be mindful that his blessed name is intended to be accompanied by the appropriate blessing, denoted here by the epithet 'saw' (*sallallahu alayhi wa salaam* – may Allah's prayers and peace be with him). For convenience, the epithet is not mentioned hereafter, but the reader should understand that the blessing is intended on each mention hereafter of the Beloved Prophet's name.

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