

## **Reflecting Stories in the Qur'an Through Historical Thinking Skills: Its Possibilities and Limitations**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to analyze the extent to which historical thinking skills help us in understanding the context and historical facts presented in the Qur'an. A qualitative approach was implemented by analyzing content related to historical thinking skills and stories in the Qur'an. There are four general skills of historical thinking skills that have been used, namely engaging with sources and their interpretations; understanding chronology; contemplating historical significance and lessons; and, understanding continuity and change. Each of these skills has been viewed and studied from its practical point of view as well as its contribution in providing a framework for understanding the stories in the Qur'an. This paper has found that there are several possibilities as well as limitations in the use of historical thinking skills in understanding the stories in the Qur'an.

**KEYWORDS:** Historical Thinking, Stories in the Qur'an, Qur'anic history

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Qur'an is not a storybook nor is it a history book. Rather it is the book of guidance (2:2, 14:1). Most of the important content of the Quran is presented and explained in the form of stories and histories that serve as a lesson to mankind (6:84, 7:40, 7:41, 7:152). Story in its Arabic term *al-qissa*, the plural being *qisas* is derived from the verb *qassa* which denotes narrating or relating (Al-Basit, 1998). *Qasas* or stories are narratives recorded as historical facts in the Qur'an. Over the years, exploring and understanding the stories in the Qur'an has become a constant genre in the

approach of interpreters, historians, academics, and even critics such as the orientalist (Saeed, 2005; Zayd & Chaabihi, 2003). Historical thinking skills, is an emerging discipline in the world of history education aimed at helping historians or teachers of history to critically approach historical facts. In this aspect the study of the potential for these skills to be practiced against the stories in the Qur'an is worth exploring. Using a qualitative approach, this paper explores relevant information through content analysis of sources related to historical thinking skills and their possible relevance to the process of understanding the Qur'anic stories. By referring to the phrase 'Qur'anic stories' or 'history in the Qur'an', this paper limits the discussion only based on human history that has happened in the context of worldly human time or referred to as 'human drama' (Kazmi, 1998) like the stories of the prophets, previous nations, stories related to the life of Prophet Muhammad PBUH, etc. Divine stories or sometimes referred to as divine drama (Kazmi, 1998) that do not fall within the scope of worldly human time such as the creation of the earth, the creation of human beings etc. are not included in this discussion.

### **Historical Thinking**

Historical thinking generally refers to the set of thinking skills needed to understand historical facts. Historians hold different views on the meaning and purpose of historical thinking. Though, the term historical thinking is considered as an umbrella term for other terms that share the same phenomenon such as historical consciousness, historical skills, historical competence, historical literacy or historical reading (Ercikan and Seixas 2015; van Drie and Dekker 2013). Wineburg, 2007, echoed by Martin & Monte-Sano, 2011 asserts that historical thinking is associated with the practice of history that requires students to engage in historical questions. Seixas, 2015 defines historical thinking as a process of emulating the behaviours of practitioners and historians by using a set of critical literacy skills for evaluating and analyzing primary source documents to construct a meaningful account of the past. Thus, in general, historical thinking is connected with the skills of the practice of historian that involves the use of critical thinking skills to process information from the past (Trombino & Bol, 2012).

Scholars in history and history education have introduced historical thinking models along with their important elements that have helped teachers and students in engaging in history learning. The models are sometimes referred to as *frameworks*, *skills* or *concepts*. All historical thinking models have tried to provide theoretically-sound template which become important thinking tools for historians, teachers and students extracting meaning from the past (Blankenship, 2015; Parkes & Donnelly, 2014; Seixas, Morton, Colyer, & Fornazzari, 2013). The formulation of various frameworks of historical thinking reasonably implying alternative disciplinary orientations to meet the challenges of understanding history in an era of accountability, high-stakes testing, and increasing fake news and historical facts (DeWitt et al., 2013; Kenna & Russell, 2014; Levin, 2016; Pace, 2011; Turner, 2016).

## **Analysis of Use of Historical Thinking Skills on Stories in the Quran**

Although most models of historical thinking skills are designed for the purpose of teaching and learning environment, they can practically be used by anyone in all circumstances to understand and interact with historical facts (Blankenship, 2015; Lovorn, 2014; Seixas et al., 2013; P. N. Stearns, Seixas, & Wineburg, 2009; Wineburg, 2001). This analysis was performed using main historical thinking skills dominantly used by historians which are sometimes referred to in different terminologies, but share the same meaning, purpose and discussion (Stéphane Lévesque, 2008; Mandell, 2008; Seixas et al., 2013; P. N. Stearns et al., 2009). Those skills are: (1) engaging with the sources and their interpretations, (2) understanding chronology, (3) contemplating historical significance and lessons, and (4) understanding continuity and change.

### **1. Engaging with sources and their interpretations**

One common starting point which is universally accepted as fundamental to the discipline of history and to the pedagogy of historical thinking is the analysis of primary sources and their interpretations. Almost every model of historical thinking skills emphasizes the importance of interacting and understanding both primary and secondary sources when one is understanding a historical fact. (Ercikan & Seixas, 2015; Gail Hickey & Clabough, 2017; Kaviza, Rahim, & Bukhari, 2018; Khoo, 2017; Stephane Lévesque, Ng-A-Fook, & Corrigan, 2014; Reisman, 2012; Stahl, Hynd, Britton, McNish, & Bosquet, 1996). Engagement with the sources requires learners to be able to read between and among documents, piecing together, through contrast and corroboration to understand the historical facts and interpretations in a larger picture than any one of the documents could provide (Ercikan & Seixas, 2015).

Al-Qur'an has a unique style in relating history. Through presenting the stories of human history from the beginning of its creation, the Qur'an itself has become a major source of understanding of the history of human existence itself (Şāfi 1998). In this regard, it has been found that most well-known Islamic scholars have emphasized the importance of the Qur'an as a key reference that guides one to understand history. For example, Iqbal in which he agrees with Ibn Khaldun's stance stated that the Qur'an is a book that gives man basic principles of historical criticism; that constantly warns people to be aware of the repetition of historical events and the consequences of the past and the various causes leading to their downfall (Mohammad Iqbal, 2013; Khaldun, Khaldūn, cAbd al-Rahman, Khaldūn, & Others, 1958; White, 2009). Bediuzzaman Said Nursi in his *Risale-i Nur* asserted that it is Al-Qur'an that gives us a specific method of treatment of historical and meta-historical events; that then also exposes us to the purpose of history, its value and its pattern (Nursi, 1993).

In the present context, practically, understanding the history from the Qur'an is made possible as most of the sources and information regarding the Qur'an have been collected by scholars and academics either in book form or available online (Ismail et al. 2013). Access to details of the

Qur'anic content is easily available in a short time. However, the use of resources to support the process of engaging historical facts from the Qur'an must take into account the general discipline of Quranic science that has set certain rules (Saeed, 2005). References must be selected from legitimate sources as there are now many academic movements that not only misinterpret the events recorded in the Qur'an, but also attempt to disprove the existence of such events (Puji & Kadir, 2013). However, this paper argues that the existence of various sources - both reliable and unreliable - should provide opportunities for historical thinkers to interact with historical facts in the Qur'an, and thus enable them to evaluate those facts. This is in fact in line with one of the orders in the Qur'an that reminds people to investigate any news to make sure it is not manipulated or forged (49:6).

## 2. Understanding chronology

Chronology is pertinent in understanding history because knowing the exact order in which events occur assists us to understand the cause and the effect of those events, and as a result, it allows us to view the big picture of history (Kurikulum, 2003; Ozmen, 2015; Peter N. Stearns, 2017; Talin, 2016; Tanaka, 2016). At the most sophisticated level, by engaging in chronological thinking, one will be able to demonstrate the significance of an event, person or development by explaining it in chronological order; and, to understand the purpose and perspective of different chronology or periodization of an event, person or development in history (Cooper, 2016; Stéphane Lévesque & Clark, 2018).

Obviously, the Qur'an does not present a historical event in chronological order as historians usually do. In most places where stories are told, the Qur'an also does not specify the names, dates or places of occurrence. In addition, often, the verses that describe a related event are found in different chapters of the Quran (Al-Suyuti, 2012; Fatoohi, 2007; Muzaffar Iqbal, 2009; Saeed, 2005). However, compiling stories from the Qur'an in chronological order including stories of prophets, ancient peoples, ancient civilizations and biography of Prophet Muhammad PBUH has long been a tradition of Muslim historians in the early days. It is in fact the Qur'an that taught them to systemize historical happenings by giving the chronological order to historical events (Rahman, 1981). For instance, a famous Muslim exegete cum historian - Ibn Kathir - compiled chronologically the stories of the prophets in his great work *Al-Bidayah wan-Nihayah* (The Beginning and the End) based on Qur'anic verses and the *Ahadith* (traditions) of the Prophet PBUH (Kathir, 2013). In another example, Ibn Khaldun in his work *al-Muqaddimah* has criticized the historical writings of earlier historians for being chronically deficient, consisting or mere descriptions and usually distorted by the need to entertain, and especially to please those funding their compilations i.e. kings and other rulers (Farooq, 2017; White, 2009). The importance of understanding chronology is further emphasized by a famous historian Abd al-Rahman al-Sakhawi in which he stated that history is an art dealing with anecdotes according to the sequence of their chronology (Bhat, 2016).

This writing argues that although the Qur'an clearly does not emphasize the understanding of historical facts in chronological order, humans are generally directed to always use the God-given reasoning ability in understanding events presented as repeatedly stated in most Qur'anic verses (2:44, 2:118, 3:118, 4:82, 6:50, 6:80, many others). One practical example of deepening historical facts in Al-Qur'an chronologically is to understand the history of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH. By grouping the Qur'an into Makkan and Madinan verses, it is possible to comprehend how Islam advanced from its inception to the Prophet's death. It will also give us an opportunity to reflect on the dynamics of change in the phases of the Prophet's life and how he interacted with his supporters and his enemies. Another practical example of following the same method is to understand the story of the prophet Musa - the longest narrative of any prophets mentioned in the Qur'an - by compiling or structuring all 510 verses (Kathir, 2013; Rafiq, 1991) related to it. However, there are limitations that need to be noted in understanding the stories of the Quran in chronological order. One of the notable things is that not all the stories or experiences of prophets or important people or a nation are described in detail in the Qur'an. The stories of Prophet Ayyub for instance, only appear in the Qur'an seven verses (Sherif, 1995). While there may be recent discussions that try to elaborate on some of the stories from the Quran by presenting them in chronological order, they may still be potentially tied to disputable sources (Al-Suyuti, 2012; Neuwirth, 2003; Puji & Kadir, 2013). Thus, understanding stories in the Qur'an chronologically is not intended to deny the method of organization of the stories in it that have been arranged according to the divine guidance. In fact, it is one of the noble efforts to respond to the Qur'an's call for us to constantly reflect on its verses (4:82, 47:24)

### **3. Contemplating Historical Significance and Lessons**

Concurrent with understanding the chronology of a story, one has to reflect on the significance of people or events involved. Understanding historical significance implies looking at the significance of a person, an event or development that can be linked to larger trends that reveal something important to us today (Kurikulum, 2003; Seixas, 2017). Historical significance is of the view that not all events need to be stated in presenting a narrative, and what has been agreed is that a historical event must be unique, extraordinary, and worth remembering (Teggart, 1962). In choosing the most significant events to explore, Ibn Khaldun assigns three standard that assist us to comprehend the most meaningful, the less meaningful, and meaningless facts in historical information: firstly, one must sort out the things that are essentials to civilization as required by its very nature; secondly, the things that are accidental to it and cannot be counted on; and, thirdly, the things that cannot possibly attach themselves to it (Khaldun et al., 1958). Thus, by engaging in this skill, one will be able to understand and evaluate the importance of a historical actor or an event in history and to take lessons from it.

The Quran presents history to us as a theater (Şāfi, 1998) in the context of providing historical significance and lessons (*'ibrah*) on the moral choices of mankind which then lead to certain effects (12:11, 18:13). For this reason, many of the stories that involve historical characters - prophets

and other important figures - and narratives of the same events are repeated over and over in different chapters (Kathir, 2013; Rustom, 2015). One of the key features that distinguish each repetition of the same story is the varied focus that draws us to different lessons from it. The Qur'an further highlights how each nation lived, prospered and died by following wrong ways of life (9:70, 14:9) and urges people to think deeply about the examples and parables conveyed through these stories (25:37-39). On this basis, Ibn Khaldun emphasized that the events reported in the Qur'an are not ancient records that simply need to be known as something that will never repeat. In introducing his historical theory, he mentioned that the rise and fall of nations follow a natural cycle of greatness and immortality often caused by the behaviour of the rulers and the actions of the people. He stated that this scenario has always happened in history (Farooq, 2017; Khaldun et al., 1958; White, 2009).

Most historical thinking models assert that understanding historical significance and taking lessons from historical events involve the ability to grasp a historical person's perspective and to explore and compare the differing perspectives to others. It is an ability to visualize oneself in any historical event and, to describe the feelings or experiences of a historical character at the time of the event. This scenario is sometimes referred to as historical empathy or ethical judgement (Kurikulum, 2003; Mandell, 2008; Seixas et al., 2013). Thus, from a practical point of view, this paper suggests that the process of reflecting lessons from the Qur'anic stories can be structured by dividing the categories of the story into three main parts by which humans can learn the lessons: Firstly, stories related to the prophets. The main point of the lesson to be understood through the stories of the prophets is their shared struggle of calling their followers to the Oneness of Allah SWT (21:25, 7:65). Stories of the struggles of the prophets are often used as examples to not only develop the character of an individual or family, but also serve as a guide for the development of a nation (Rahman, 1981; Şāfi, 1998). Significantly, the stories in the Qur'an are also used repeatedly by Allah SWT to console Prophet Muhammad PBUH and strengthening his heart to perform his mission by revealing to him the stories of previous Prophets who also faced opposition and threats from their own followers (46:35). Secondly, stories about people or prominent people of the past. Some of the stories related to this category are the story of Musa and the knowledgeable person - popularly narrated as Khidr (18:61-82), the story of Dhulqarnain (18:83-98), Luqman (31:12-19), Pharaoh (verses that mention word Pharaoh contain over 150 verses in the Qur'an (Yusuf Ali & Eliyasee, 2011)); Qarun (28:76) and many others. In general, the presentation of these stories illustrates two types of effects: the effect of actions based on divine command; and the impact of actions based on the human instinct itself (Şāfi, 1998). These stories, which mostly reveal the causes and consequences of events, should serve as lessons in assessing the extent to which humans can make decisions based on their moral judgments. Lastly, the stories relating to events that happened during the life time of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH. The lessons of the stories of the prophet Muhammad need to be viewed from a more critical and detailed aspect because at some point - not all - the Qur'anic verses were revealed around the events surrounding him. With the existence of many biographical writings or known as the *sirah* of the Prophet - whether

classical or modern - details of the stories of the Prophet Muhammad based on the Qur'an and the Sunnah can contribute to the extensive understanding of the lessons of each event.

#### **4. Understanding continuity and change**

Continuity and change are among the key criteria in the practice of historical thinking that have an impact on the assessment of a historical event. In the context of historical thinking, evaluating continuity refers to seeing things that have not changed that sometimes extend over a long period of time (Counsell, 2011; Foster, 2013; Peter N. Stearns, 2017). In assessing the continuity of historical events, one should be able to study what is unchanged - for example religious, political, economic, cultural, way of thinking, etc. - and to explain their causes. Change refers to something that is changing and very different from the nature of the past. Changes in history can occur in two situations: First, the changes that have occurred over a long period of time and often the causes of these changes are difficult to identify. The second category is the immediate change caused by an event. It is usually referred to as a "turning point" in history.

This paper argues that the process of applying the skill of 'understanding change and continuity' to historical events in the Quran may be a daunting task as one must become familiar with the historical concepts and historical events presented in the Quran depending on to the right interpretations and arguments. However, this paper proposes that the focus of practice on this skill should at least be based on the following dimensions:

Firstly, to understand the unique nature of continuity and change as presented in Al-Qur'an. Although the idea of continuity in history is always associated with positive progress or material advancement (Şāfi, 1998; White, 2009), it is illustrated in the Qur'an by different phenomena. The Qur'an explains that the change in people is closely related to the change that is being made in their own souls (13:11, 8:53). The Qur'an emphasizes the direct relationship between a nation's positive progress and their adherence to truth and justice; while from another aspect, the Qur'an relates the collapse of a people due to their ignorance and refusal to uphold the truth and justice (10:13). For instance, the stories of the 'Ad and Thamud people who had initially enjoyed material wealth and comfort were destroyed because of their behaviour that ignored divine guidance (6:6, 7:69;74, 10:13, 24:55).

Secondly, to understand that the historical presentation of the Qur'an shows that the fundamental element will never change, and certain particular things can change in accordance with socio-historical demands (Mir, 2013). This means that human history as it is presented in the Qur'an is, in fact, based on the same storyline that is repeated over and over again (Kazmi, 1998). What have changed are just the characters involved in it with some added variety of incidents. For example, the narrations of Al-Qur'an on the succession of the prophets have shown that they carried the

same main message i.e. to restore the Word of God, but every message was adapted to fit the socio-historical context of every nation concerned (2:252-253, 4:163-165, 7:73, 7:85, 26:123-125). The Qur'an retains the perspective of the journey of human history in the form of a single *ummah* although in many cases the prophets were sent to different times, places and nations (Farahi, 2008).

Thirdly, to understand the changes in the tempo and subject matter of the Qur'an (Kazmi, 1998). Exploring the changes in the subject matter of the Qur'an gives us an opportunity to see how the Qur'an interacts with its target group. For example, by arranging the chapters in Al-Qur'an into Makkan and Madinan, we can see patterns of change in the tempo and subject matter of the Qur'an and, from that point, it is feasible to see how Islam developed from its beginning to the Prophet's death. The revelations in Makkan period focused on introducing to a new audience - the Arabs - the traditional tenets of monotheism. The language used in these chapters was passionate and often addressed people in general. The historical events of previous nations were mentioned as to link them to the contemporary situation of the Arabs (Ali, 2010; Dost & Ahmad, 2008; Halim, 2015). While the revelation in Madinan period took a more rational tone with far more specific language and focused on particular legislative issues and instead of addressing humanity as a whole, the focus was mostly directed to the believers and People of the Book. However, this example does not mean to say that the Qur'an is static and its content is contained in any one moment of time. Rather, the relevance and the scope of the Qur'an become wider as human experience becomes more dense and expansive in and with history as time does not contain the Qur'an, but that the Qur'an contains time (Kazmi, 1998).

## Conclusion

Due to the depth and breadth of the knowledge contained in the Qur'an, the full knowledge contained in the Qur'an will always be beyond what anyone can encompass. It is virtually impossible for one to stop and conclude the meaning and interpretation of a verse. However, there is always an opportunity for us to learn and explore new meanings from and about the Qur'an. Historical thinking skills - as evidenced in this exploratory study - have the potential to be one of the ways to interact with the historical facts presented in the Qur'an. Future studies should focus on the construction of models or modules of understanding historical narratives from the Qur'an based on the context of historical thinking skills. While there are some limitations to the use of historical thinking skills to understand the history of the Qur'an, there is always room for us to develop certain competencies related to both historical thinking skills and Qur'anic science to ensure historical facts in the Qur'an is approached in a systematic and meaningful way.

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