

Home > Trends of History in Qur'an > Laws of History in the Qur'an > Length of One Day in the Terminology of the Laws of History

Laws of History in the Qur'an

Now time has come that we should know the different ways in which the laws of history are mentioned in the Qur'an. In other words, we should see how the laws which, from the viewpoint of the Qur'an, govern history have been expressed by it, and how has the Qur'an pointed to the norms of history.

In the Qur'an we find three forms of the expression of the laws of history. We propose to study each of them minutely and to show how they differ from each other.

(i) The first form in which the Qur'an has mentioned a law of history is that of a conditional form. When two phenomena or two sets of phenomena are linked together in the realm of history, the Qur'an expresses this link in the form of the two clauses of a conditional sentence indicating that whenever the conditional clause (protoasis) materializes, the concluding clause (apodosis) is also bound to materialize. This form is applicable to many natural laws and norms also on various levels.

For example, when we speak of the law of boiling, we always express this law by means of a conditional sentence. We say that if water as a result of proximity to heat attains a certain degree of temperature (100°C), it boils because of a special kind of pressure.

This is an example of the relationship between the two clauses of a conditional statement. The phenomenon of the boiling of water appears whenever a certain condition, that is proximity to heat and a particular degree of temperature is fulfilled. Here the natural phenomenon of boiling, which means conversion of water into gas, has been described in the form of a conditional sentence.

This law does not say whether this condition has been fulfilled or not. It merely says that if this particular condition is fulfilled, its consequence inevitably materializes. In other words water must boil at a certain degree of heat. That is what the law of a conditional statement tells us.

This sort of laws renders great service to man in his ordinary life, and plays, an effective role in his development. With the knowledge of these laws man can take a suitable action in respect of the consequence of a condition. If he needs it, he may take action to fulfill the prerequisite condition, and if

he is not interested in it, he can prevent its fulfillment.

If a person is interested in the boiling of water, he should arrange the materialization of the appropriate conditions stipulated in the law of boiling, and if he wants water not to boil, he should ensure that water is not heated to the boiling point.

Hence, a law advanced in the form of a conditional sentence has a constructive value in human life. From the above it also becomes clear that there is a philosophy behind the expression of laws in the form of conditional sentences. Allah has based the system of this world on universal laws and firm norms. He draws man's attention to this firm and compact system of the world so that man may know where he stands in it. Allah tells man about the factors which make or mar his life so that he himself may be able to meet his due needs properly.

If the boiling process of water was to take place accidentally, was not subject to a definite law and did not require heat, man could not control this process, nor would it have been possible for him to boil or not to boil water as he wanted.

Man acquired this skill when he came to know the definite norms and firm laws of the world. The laws of nature have been put forward to him in the form of conditional propositions, thus enabling him to see things in light, not in darkness.

In the light of the laws of nature he can determine his course of action in regard to the world.

Exactly the same applies to the forms in which the Qur'an enunciates the laws of history. In many cases we find these laws put forward in the form of conditional statements. For this purpose the Qur'an mentions two interconnected social or historical phenomena and says whenever the first phenomenon appears, the second phenomenon is bound to appear. It does not say when the first phenomenon appears or when it does not.

Several of the Qur'anic verses mentioned by us earlier narrate the historical laws in the form of a conditional statement. In this connection the following verse may be recalled:

Allah does not change the condition of a people unless they change what is in their hearts.

(Surah ar-Ra'd, 13:11)

Here a law of history has been mentioned, and as we explained earlier and will further explain later, it has been put forward in the form of a conditional statement, for the verse says that there exists an inseparable link between the two different changes, namely a change in man's inner content and a change in his external position.

Substantially this is a case of conditional statement. The divine law mentioned here virtually says if a people change internally, their material condition and social position are bound to change consequently. Hence divine law has been stated in the form of a conditional statement.

The following verse is another example of a law expressed by means of a conditional statement:

If they continue to tread the right path, we shall give them to drink of water in abundance. (Surah al Jinn, 72: 16)

We have already said that this verse speaks of a law of history, according to which good produce depends on fair distribution. This is a clear case of a conditional statement.

Another example is provided by the following verse:

When We would destroy a township, We send commandment to its people who live at ease, and afterward they commit abomination therein and so the word (of doom) has effect on it, and We annihilate it with complete annihilation. (Surah Bani Isra'il, 17: 17)

In this verse also a historical norm has been stated in the form of a conditional statement. Here two things have been combined, one of them being the direction of the command of Allah to the wicked and those who live at ease and their disobedience of these commandments, and the other being the consequent destruction and annihilation of such a society.

This is another law of history put forward as a conditional statement. The law does not say in which circumstances the condition mentioned in it is to materialize. It only stipulates that as and when the condition will materialize, the consequent clause of the law is also bound to materialize with it. This is the first form in which the laws of history have been mentioned in the Qur'an.

(ii) The second form in which the laws of history have been advanced in the Qur'an is that of a definite and unqualified statement. In many cases the laws of nature are stated in this way also. When an astronomical prediction is made on the basis of the movement of the planets, such as the prediction about the time of a lunar or a solar eclipse, no condition is attached to such a statement.

In this case a scientific law or a scientific question is put forward as a definite and unconditional statement. Man can in no way influence or modify the conditions and the circumstances of such occurrences. Therefore a prediction about them is made in the form of a definite and unqualified statement without any conditions being attached to it.

When we say that the sun will eclipse on such and such day or say that the moon will eclipse on such and such night. We express a scientific question in the form of a definite statement and not a conditional statement.

In such cases it is not within human power to change the conditions or the circumstances of the matter in question because it is not conditional. When we say that the sun or that the moon will eclipse, though we speak with reference to the future, we make a firm statement. The same is true of the weather forecasts based on scientific laws.

When it is said that it will rain in such and such area, the statement is firm and unconditional and forecasts rainfall at a definite place and at a definite time.

This is the second form of the expression of the laws of history. While dealing with the analysis of the social elements we will cite some more examples of it from the Qur'an.

This second form of expression of the laws and norms of history has created a wrong impression among the European thinkers, who maintain that historical norms are inconsistent with human freedom, for if it is presumed that they regulate man's life, he can have no freedom of choice.

This wrong idea has led some thinkers to say that in this world man has only a negative role, for he cannot change the norms of history. These thinkers have renounced man's freedom for the sake of historical norms to which they have attached too much importance.

The followers of this way of thinking say that the role which man plays is negative, not positive. Man is like a device which moves as required. We will elaborate this idea later.

Some other thinkers with a view to combine the idea of human freedom and the idea of the apparent existence of the norms of history, maintain that it is man's power of choice alone which establishes the norms of history. The historical laws are in fact subject to man's will. Hence we need not sacrifice man's freedom for the sake of historical laws.

On the other hand it may be said that man's freedom and his power of choice is a phenomenon which in its turn is itself a part of the norms of history. In this case also though man's freedom is affected, yet in a concealed manner.

Some believe that the laws of history should be rejected altogether in the interest of human freedom. A number of European scholars are of the opinion that to maintain man's freedom the scene of history should be kept outside the purview of the universal laws and it should be maintained that no special laws are applicable to the field of history. This, they say, is necessary to promote man's free choice in respect of his activities.

All these points of view are largely incorrect, as they are based on the wrong idea of the existence of a basic contradiction between the laws of history and man's freedom. What is the source of this misunderstanding? The misunderstanding has arisen from the fact that the scholars having this wrong notion are under the impression that the laws of history are always and invariably expressed in the form of a verbal statement having the import of certainty.

Had it been so really and had we believed that in the presence of the laws of history no scope was left for human effort and initiative, their contention would, of course, have been correct to refute their wrong impression it is enough to refer back to the first form of the laws of history, that is the form of a conditional statement.

In the conditional statements which we have quoted from the Qur'an, the main condition mostly refers to man's will, his choice and the relation between the conditional clause and the consequent clause. It may be observed that the conditional clause invariably implies man's effort and his work.

For example take the Qur'anic verse which says:

Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in their hearts.

In this verse it has been specifically stated that the change in the condition of people depends on their own deeds. They themselves can bring about a change if they so want. When a law of history is mentioned in the language of a conditional statement, and the stipulated condition directly relates to man's will and choice, then the law of history itself necessitates the existence of man's free will and his choice.

It gives man freedom of action so that he may change his condition. It is knowledge of a natural law, such as the law of the boiling of water enhances his power, for when he knows under what conditions water boils, he can boil it at his will.

In this way the laws of history in the form of conditional statements are not only not inconsistent with man's freedom and will, but in contrast they lay stress on these qualities. They also explain the results of man's actions so that he may take the proper course leading to the desired results. This was the second form of the laws of history.

(iii) The third form of the laws of history to which the Qur'an has given special attention, relates to the laws which are not firmly resolute and unbreakable, but imply only a sort of natural tendency of human history.

Obviously there is a difference between a tendency and a firm law. For further clarification, let us conceive the idea of a law. Our normal conception of a scientific law is that of a humanly unbreakable norm, for we know that man cannot violate or evade natural laws.

It is within man's power not to offer prayers, for to offer prayers is a duty prescribed by Islamic law, and not a law of creation or a universal law. Similarly one can take alcoholic drinks, for prohibition of intoxicants is a rule of Islamic law, not a law of creation. In contrast man can never violate universal laws and norms.

For example, it is not possible to make water not to boil or to delay its boiling a single moment in spite of the presence of all the conditions necessary for its boiling, for the law of boiling is inescapable and cannot be evaded.

Normally we have this concept of a law and it is correct to a certain extent. But it is not necessary that every natural law should be so inflexible and unbreakable. We have a number of natural tendencies, which though effective in the natural development of history and man, are not rigid enough and can be

resisted. But still they cannot be resisted or violated for long. You cannot put off boiling of water for a single moment, but there are tendencies which can be contained for quite a long time.

We do not mean to say that on account of their having a different character, these tendencies do not influence the movement of history. These tendencies being flexible, can be resisted and violated, though according to the norms of history they may in the long run gradually crush all those who opposes them.

From there it may be said that there are some tendencies which may safely be resisted with impunity, but there are some others which can be resisted only for a short time, and then they crush him who fights against them in contravention of the laws of history. This has been a characteristic of genuine human tendencies and drives all over history.

Conjugal Drive is a Historical Norm

To make the point clear we can say that there are human drives which are effective in man's birth and his constitution. These tendencies and drives have a concrete reality and are not merely a legal matter. Marriage and conjugal ties are meant for creating special relations between man and woman in human society.

These tendencies should not be regarded as merely a legal formality. In contrast they are a genuine drive which has come into existence for man's development and should not be considered to be merely a legal act or a religious command. This drive is deep-rooted in man's nature and is a part of human constitution. It attracts man to the opposite sex for the purpose of the survival of human race by means of creating a particular social set-up called marriage.

This tendency or a drive in itself is a genuine norm, not a mere legal form, and that is why it can be resisted for a short period only. The example of many people shows the possibility of ignoring the natural law of normal conjugal relations for a while. In contrast, it is not possible for anyone to stop the operation of the law of boiling for any length of time.

A society which plays with the divine laws of nature signs its death warrant with its own hand, for a deviation from natural tendencies involves it into so many perversions and consequently leads it to devastation and annihilation. That is why we said that it was possible to violate these laws for a limited period, but it was not possible to ignore them for long, for the violation of these laws leads the defaulters to annihilation.

Natural Need of Man and Woman to Behave Differently

The tendency that man and woman should have two different sets of duties and should behave differently is a plan designed by nature and not a mere legal provision. It is a natural tendency of man and woman and not a decision imposed on them from outside. But still this tendency can be resisted.

A law may be enacted to the effect that it is man's duty to stay at home to nurse and rear children and that woman must go out to earn livelihood and undertake external activities. By the enforcement of such a law the tendency of the natural division of duties between man and woman can be resisted, but such an arrangement being contrary to the norms of history and the natural genius of man and woman, cannot last forever.

By the enforcement of such a law society will lose woman's special talent for nursing the children, her spirit of motherly love and her aptitude for being patient in the face of the hardships and difficulties unbearable to men. This law appears to be exactly like entrusting the job of a carpenter working in the construction of a building to a blacksmith and that of the blacksmith to the carpenter. Such an action is possible.

The building in question may get erected, but it cannot last long, and with the passage of time is bound to collapse before long as the result of the contravention of historical norms. The resistance of a natural urge which is the basis of man's development will pull him down. Though the resistance of a natural urge is possible for a short time, its reaction will appear sooner or later.

Religiousness is a Historical Norm

The most important example of historical norms is religion itself. It is also one of the historical norms and not a mere legal provision. We can define religion in two ways. It can be introduced as a divine legislation called in the terminology of scholastic jurisprudence – the divine will of law-giving. The Qur'an says:

He has ordained for you that religion which He commanded to Nuh (Noah) and that which We revealed to you and that which We commanded to Ibrahim (Abraham), Musa (Moses) and Isa (Jesus), saying: 'Establish the religion and be not divided therein. Dreadful for the idolaters is that to which you call them.' (Surah al-Shura, 42:13)

In this verse religion has been described as a law given by Allah. But at another place it has been described as a law rooted in man's own nature and structure.

Set your face to religion as a man upright by nature – the nature framed by Allah, in which He has created man. There is no altering of Allah's creation. That is the right religion, but most men know not. (Surah al-Rum, 30:30)

In this verse religion has been described not only as a law ordained and imposed on man from above, but also as a part of his divine nature which can never be changed. This verse simply makes a statement and does not prescribe any rule of law.

It says that man has been so created that religion is a part of his nature, and that the divine creation cannot be altered. Religion cannot be detached from man as no other part of his body can be detached

from him. Religion is not a cultural matter acquired by man over history. It being a part of man's divine nature, he cannot dispense with it.

Religion is a part of the nature in which Allah has created man and Allah's creation is unalterable. Should religion be alterable, it would become a thing acquired by man in the course of his cultural and social development over history.

The Qur'an wants to say that religion is not a thing which may either be accepted or rejected by man. It is a part of his nature which Allah has framed and which is unalterable.

'There is no altering of the creation of Allah'

is an indicative, not an imperative expression. It only makes a factual statement when it says that religion is a divine creation and as such is unalterable. So long man is man, religion is a divine norm for him.

There is a difference between this norm and other norms, for this norm is not as irresistible and rigid as the law of boiling. This norm can be resisted for a short time in the same way as the law of marriage and the urge of natural relations between man and woman can be resisted. It is possible to withstand marriage by indulging into sexual perversion, but that can be done only for a short time.

Similarly for a short time religiousness also can be resisted, but it is not possible to deny religion and ignore this big truth forever.

For a short time man can close his eyes and refuse to see the sun. Similarly he can refrain from seeing the religious truth, but he can do so only for a short time, and those who reject religion are punished before long. Here we do not mean that punishment which would be meted out to the wrong-doers by the angels on the Day of Judgement, nor do we mean that punishment which is awarded to the criminals by the police.

In this case the retribution ensues from the laws of history themselves. This punishment descends on those who want to change the unchangeable creation of Allah. The Qur'an says:

They ask you to hasten the punishment. Surely Allah never fails His promise, but a day with Allah is as a thousand years of what you reckon. (Surah al-Hajj, **22:47**)

We say that a man who fights against the third form of the laws of history, is before long afflicted with retribution and according to the norms of history receives punishment very soon. Here the phrase 'very soon' should be taken to signify historical quickness and not what we understand of it in our ordinary life.

This is the point which has been mentioned in the above verse in regard to the punishment to be meted out to the idolaters. This verse first mentions the punishment which descended on the lands of the wrongdoers of the past.

Then it says that the pagans are asking the Holy Prophet to hasten the punishment promised to them, and saying: Where is that punishment? When will it come? We have not received it so far although we don't believe in you, fight against you, and have closed our ears to your Qur'an. Then why are we not punished?

Length of One Day in the Terminology of the Laws of History

In the above-mentioned verse the Qur'an speaks of historical quickness which is different from ordinary quickness. The verse says:

"They ask you to hasten the punishment. Surely Allah never fails His promise, (for the historical norms are firm and stable), ***but a day with Allah is as a thousand years of what you reckon. "***

The length of one day for the purpose of the laws of history by the reckoning of Allah is 1000 ordinary years. As we explained earlier, when the Qur'an speaks of

"The words of Allah",

means the laws and the norms of history, and in the words of Allah the minimum length of a day is measured equal to that of 1000 years. As you know there is another verse in which one day has been described to be equal to 50,000 years. In that verse the day refers to the day of judgement and not to a day of this world. That is how the two verses are reconciled. The verse in question is as under:

The angels and the Holy Spirit ascend to Him in a day whereof the span is fifty thousand years. So be patient gracefully. They behold that day far off, while we behold it nigh: the day when the sky will become as molten copper. (Surah al-Ma'arij, 70:4-8)

Here the Day refers to the Day of Judgement, for it is on that day only that the sky will become as molten copper. The Day of Judgement is estimated to be as long as 50,000 years. As for the previous verse, that spoke of the day of collective punishment, which was fixed according to the norms of history. In that case

"a day with Allah is as 1000 years of what you reckon "

In short, the third form of the laws of history consists of man's inner tendencies and his drives which are a part of his structure and which influence history. These drives can be resisted, but only for a short time, not for a long period.

But one thing is to be noted. The length of time should not be reckoned as we normally do in our ordinary life. One day in the ***'words of Allah'*** and for the purpose of divine norms is as 1000 years of what we ordinarily reckon.

Religion is the best and the most important example of the third form of the laws of history. Religion is a

historical norm. What is the role of religion? What is its source? Why is it not a matter of mere enacting a law? Is it exactly as natural as the law of marriage between a man and a woman? If so, why and how?

To answer these questions and to know for certain that religion is a norm of history, it is necessary to analyse the elements forming society in the light of the Qur'an. Now the question is how to analyse society? In our opinion it should be analysed in the light of the following verse:

When your Lord said to the angels: 'I am placing in the earth a vicegerent', they said: 'Will You put there one who will make there mischief and will shed blood, while we proclaim Your praise and glorify You?' He said: 'I know what you do not know.' (Surah al-Baqarah, 2:30)

This verse provides us with the finest, the deepest and the most exact points to analyse society. We are going to analyse these points and make a comparative study of them so that in the end we may be able to ascertain how religion is one of the norms of history.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/trends-history-quran-muhammad-baqir-al-sadr/laws-history-quran>