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“It Was Not Thyself that Threw, but God Threw” – a Few Remarks on the Sūra *Al-Anfāl*, 17

ABSTRACT

The subject of this study is a historical-Islamic, cultural, and translational analysis of verse 17 of Sūra VIII *Al-Anfāl* (“The Spoils”). The basis for this analysis are the classical Muslim commentaries on the Qur’an, whose authors present several versions of the events referred to in this verse. Although one version definitely predominates, translations of the Qur’an into Western languages reveal ambiguity, especially in the meaning of the lexeme *ramā*. Its interpretation affects how the course of the event, which was the “cause of the revelation” (*sabab an-nuzūl*) is understood – not only for this verse, but the whole sūra. While differences in translations of the Qur’an into other languages suggest that some Arabists recognized the interpretative possibilities offered by verse 17 of the mentioned sūra indicated by medieval Muslim exegetes, this issue has not been examined in detail in Western scholarship. In turn, modern Muslim researchers typically cite medieval commentaries without taking a clear position, which remains difficult to do at present.

KEYWORDS: Qur’an, Sūra *Al-Anfāl* (“The Spoils”), battles of the Prophet Muḥammad, translations of the Qur’an

STRESZCZENIE

„To nie ty rzuciłeś, kiedy rzuciłeś, lecz to Bóg rzucił” – kilka uwag o wersecie 17 sury *Al-Anfāl* („Łupy”)

Przedmiotem niniejszego opracowania jest historyczno-islamistyczna, kulturowa i translatologiczna analiza wersetu 17 sury VIII *Al-Anfāl* („Łupy”). Podstawą analizy są klasyczne muzułmańskie komentarze do Koranu; ich autorzy przytaczają kilka wersji wydarzeń, do których odnosi się ten werset. Mimo że zdecydowanie jedna z nich przeważa, to jednak chociażby w przekładach Koranu na języki zachodnie odzwierciedla się niejednoznaczność szczególnie

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w zakresie znaczenia leksemu *ramā*, którego interpretacja odmiennie ukazuje przebieg wydarzenia będącego „przyczyną objawienia” (*sabab an-nuzūl*) nie tylko tego wersetu, ale całej sury. Choć różnice w przekładach Koranu na inne języki świadczą o tym, że niektórzy arabiści dostrzegali możliwości interpretacyjne, jakie daje werset 17 wspomnianej sury, wskazywane przez dawnych muzułmańskich egzegetów, to zagadnienie to jak dotąd nie doczekało się szczegółowego opracowania w językach zachodnich. Z kolei współcześni badacze muzułmańscy zazwyczaj przytaczają średniowieczne komentarze, nie decydując się na przyjęcie jednoznacznego stanowiska, co zresztą w chwili obecnej jest raczej niemożliwe.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Koran, sura *Al-Anfāl* („Łupy”), bitwy Proroka Muhammada, przekłady Koranu

Introduction

The Qur'an has been a constant subject of study for centuries, both by Muslim scholars and Western researchers. It has been subjected to various analyses and syntheses, and each year brings new interpretations of ideas, verses, and individual words, shedding fresh light on this text, which remains full of mystery.

In this paper, I shall focus on *sūra Al-Anfāl*, or rather on the fragment of its verse 17, as indicated in the title. This fragment involves an ambiguity already noted by classical exegetes of the holy book of Islam, which, however, is rarely addressed, especially in Western studies, because Muslim scholarship does not avoid pointing out controversies regarding this problem. The central issue is the meaning of the verb *ramā* – “to throw”.¹ This issue is particularly important in translations of the Qur'an into foreign languages, where the verb often lacks referents in its semantic field consistent with its Arabic equivalent used in the Qur'anic text. The article will critically analyze the medieval Arabic Qur'anic commentaries, most of which highlight the controversies regarding the events behind this Qur'anic message. I shall also examine how translators of the Qur'an into foreign languages have approached this fragment. The analysis will show what Muslims mean when they speak of the “untranslatability of the Qur'an” (see, e.g. Poonawala, 1990; von Grunebaum, 2001).

The first part of the study is of a propaedeutic nature – I shall briefly characterise the *sūra* itself and the Battle of Badr, which is regarded as the historical context for the revelation of *Al-Anfāl*, and then I shall analyse the issue in question in linguistic, religious, and translational terms.

¹ Badawī and Abdel Haleem (2008, p. 384) identify five meanings of the verb *ramā*. Referring to the verse under discussion, they interpret its sense as “to throw [a spear], to shoot [an arrow].”

Sūra *Al-Anfāl*, 17 and its contexts

Sūra *Al-Anfāl* – (“The Spoils”) is the eighth sūra of the Qur’an and is the 88th in the order of revelation. This title in Muslim literature is called *tawfiqī* (“indisputable”). It also has other names: *Sūrat Badr* (“Sūra of the Battle of Badr”), *sūrat al-ḡihād* (“Sūra of *jihad*”) (Nāṣir, 1426 H., pp. 199–200) and *Sūrat al-furqān* (Sūra of the criterion)² – the latter being referred to as “subject to analysis” (*iḡtibādī*). According to classical commentators, it was revealed in connection with the Battle of Badr on 17th March 624 (17 Ramadan 2 A.D.) between the Muslims of Medina and the Meccans (Al-Wāḥidī, 2001, p. 131; Nöldeke & Schwally, 1909, pp. 187–189). It is a Medinan sūra, containing 75 āyats. Together with Sūra IX, *At-Tawba* (“Repentance”), it is referred to as *Al-Qarīnatān* (“Two Pairs”) due to the similarity of the issues discussed. According to another classification, it is included among the so-called *as-sab‘ at-ṭiwāl* (“seven long ones”), i.e., the longest sūras of the Qur’an (Al-Qabandī, 2017, pp. 42–43).

The Battle of Badr is one of the most significant events of early Islam. Under the command of Muḥammad, the Muslims attacked the Quraysh warriors, numbering about a thousand, who were escorting a Meccan caravane heading from Syria to Mecca. Muḥammad’s unit consisted of roughly 300 men. Despite being heavily outnumbered, the Muslims achieved victory. Accounts of the battle emphasize the direct involvement of God and hosts of angels in the fight. This was the first major Muslim victory, which boosted their morale and persuaded many hesitant tribes to join the new community. The who participated in the battle – the *Badriyyūn* (“Badrites”) – came to be regarded as part of the Muslim elite. The clash can be seen as one of the decisive events that soon paved the way for the triumph of Islam on the Arabian Peninsula (Haykal, 1976, pp. 216–241; Hamidullah, 1992, pp. 22–42; Watt, 1956, pp. 10–16; Aṭ-Ṭabarī, 1961, pp. 421–479; Aṭ-Ṭabarī, 1987, pp. 26–85).

The verse:

فَلَمْ تَقْتُلُوهُمْ وَلَٰكِنَّ اللَّهَ قَتَلَهُمْ ۖ وَمَا رَمَيْتَ إِذْ رَمَيْتَ وَلَٰكِنَّ اللَّهَ رَمَىٰ ۚ وَلِيُبْلِيَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ مِنْهُ بَلَاءٌ حَسَنًا ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ

Fa-lam taqtulūhum wa-lakinna ʾAllāha qatalahum wa-mā ramayta id ramayta wa-lakinna ʾAllāha ramā wa-li-yublyā ʾal-muʾminīna minhu balāʾan ḥasanan inna ʾAllāha samīʾun ʿalīmun

You did not slay them, but God slew them; and when you threwest, **it was not thyself that threw, but God threw**, and that He might confer on the believers a fair benefit; surely God is All-Hearing, All-knowing (Arberry, 2008, p.171).³

2 In the 41st *ayat* of the same sūrah, the Battle of Badr is also referred to as *yawm al-furqān* (Ibn Kaṭīr, 1997, pp. 65–66).

3 Quotes from the Qur’an according to Arberry, 2008.

The starting point for the analysis of the issue indicated at the outset will be a brief yet substantial commentary on this verse by Faḥr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī (1149 or 1150–1209):

There are three opinions regarding the reasons for the revelation of this verse. The first, and this is the opinion of most exegetes, is that it was revealed on the occasion of the Battle of Badr. The point is that [the Prophet], peace be upon him, took a handful of pebbles/gravel (*ḥaṣḥā*) and threw them in the faces of the warriors, shouting: “Shame on the faces!” (*šābat al-wuġūb*).⁴ And the eyes and noses of all the idolaters were struck with them. This throw was the reason for their defeat and this is what the ayat is about. The second opinion is that it was revealed on the occasion of the Battle of Ḥaybar.⁵ It is said that [the Prophet], PBUH, took a bow while standing at the gates of the city and shot an arrow. It hit Ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq⁶ while he was sitting on his mare.⁷ And it was revealed: “it was not thyself that threw, but God threw”. A third opinion is that the verse was revealed on the occasion of the Battle of Uḥud⁸ in connection with the killing of Ubayy Ibn Ḥalaf.⁹ It so happened that he came to the Prophet, PBUH, with a rotten bone and asked: Muḥammad, who will revive these bones when they are already rotten? To this he [Muḥammad] PBUH replied: God will give them life, then He will put you to death and revive you,¹⁰ then He will send you into the fire. He was captured at the Battle of Badr and later ransomed. He then said to the Prophet: I have a mare which I feed well every day¹¹ so that

- 4 A magical gesture, considered disrespectful towards the enemy, straight from Jahiliyya (Watt, 1956, p. 312 et seq.; Gaudefroy-Demombynes, 1969, p. 122; Robinson, 1971, p. 166); application in early Islam (Ḥassān Ibn Thābit, 1994, p. 94; Qutbuddin, 2019, pp. 109, 526); throwing sand in the face (Aṭ-Ṭabarī, 1961, p. 506).
- 5 The Battle of Ḥaybar took place in 628 between the followers of the Prophet and the Jews of that city. Following the Muslim victory, the city’s inhabitants were killed (Haykal, 1976, pp. 360–374).
- 6 A Jewish opponent of the Prophet from the Naḍīr tribe. Information about his life is uncertain, and sources provide varying accounts of his death (Motzki, 2000).
- 7 The same also appears in the editions of 1938 (p. 140) and 2012 (p. 127). Only this author provides this version of the story. Other sources quoting this account state that he died in his bed (*fī/’alā firāšihī*), e.g. Ibn Kaṭīr (1997, p. 31) and As-Suyūṭī (2011, p. 41).
- 8 The Battle of Uḥud took place in 625 between the followers of the Prophet and the Quraysh of Medina. The Muslims were defeated, many were killed and the Prophet was injured (Haykal, 1976, pp. 253–270).
- 9 A fierce enemy of the Prophet of Mecca; according to many traditions, the only man the Prophet personally killed.
- 10 “[H]e says, ‘Who shall quicken the bones when they are decayed?’ Say: ‘He shall quicken them, who originated them the first time’” (Arberry, 2008, p. 455).
- 11 The text includes a measurement unit that is difficult to estimate precisely due to variations across different periods and places in the Muslim world: *farq* (or *faraq*) *min darra* (see for example: Lane, 1863, vol. III, p. 957; vol. V, p. 2385).

I can kill you when riding on it. To which he [Muḥammad] PBUH replied: I will kill you if God wills it! When the battle of Uḥud took place, Ubayy appeared riding on this mare, wishing to approach the Messenger, PBUH. Then the Muslims turned towards him to kill him, but the Prophet said: Hold back! And he threw his spear (*ḥarba*) at him¹² and hit him in the rib, and he died from this wound on the way. This verse was intended to refer to this event. However, it is most correct that it concerns the Battle of Badr (Ar-Rāzī, 1981, p. 145).

However, a fourth historical interpretation is also found, mentioned for example by Ibn al-ʿArabī (2003, p. 387) and Al-Qurṭubī (2006, p. 477), which holds that the verse refers to the battle of Ḥunayn.¹³ The former explicitly states: “there are four opinions” (*arbaʿat aqwāl*). In all these cases, the commentators emphasize the involvement of supernatural powers on the Prophet’s side.

As I mentioned, the analysis shall focus on the lexeme *ramā*, in the primary sense “to throw,” around which all historical interpretations revolve; these interpretations themselves are not of major importance for the present study. The Qur’anic text does not indicate what the Prophet – or rather God – threw with his hand.¹⁴

Very similar, and at key points identical, versions are also provided by medieval commentators of the Qur’an: Aṭ-Ṭabarī (2001, p. 84),¹⁵ As-Samarqandī (1993, p. 11), Az-Zamaḥṣarī (2009, p. 407), Ibn al-ʿArabī (2003, p. 388), Al-Qurṭubī (2006, p. 478), Ar-Rāzī (1981, p. 145), Al-Bayḍawī (n.d., p. 53), Al-Ḥāzin (2004, p. 301), Ibn Kaṭīr (1997, p. 31) and As-Suyūṭī (2011, p. 40). Ibn al-ʿArabī, Ar-Rāzī and Al-Qurṭubī add that this version is “the most correct” (*Badr aṣaḥḥ*). Some exegetes add that by throwing sand/pebbles/gravel into the eyes of the enemy, God cast “fear and terror” on them through the Prophet (*ar-ruʿb* and *al-fazaʿ*) (Az-Zamaḥṣarī, 2009, p. 407; Ar-Rāzī, 1981, p. 144; Al-Qurṭubī, 2006, p. 478; Al-Bayḍawī, n.d., p. 53; Al-Ḥāzin, 2004,

12 The *ḥarba*, it seems, has no exact equivalent in Western weaponry. Kennedy defines it as follows: “This may have been a short throwing spear with a long blade” (2001, p. 176; see also: Lane, 1863, vol. II, p. 541). In Ibn Sida’s work “*al-ḥarba*: smaller than a spear [*rumḥ*]” (1996, p. 34) – without a broader description (chapter: *Mā yuṣbih ar-rumḥ* / “What is like a spear”). Schwartzlose refers to *ḥarba* as “kürzere Spiesse” (1896, p. 47). Another name for this weapon is *alla* (Schwartzlose, 1896, p. 213).

13 Battle of Muslims with Arab tribes in 630 (Haykal, 1976, pp. 414–421).

14 In the oldest historical account of the Battle of Badr, by ʿUrwa Ibn az-Zubayr (d. 713), quoted by Aṭ-Ṭabarī, another phrase can be found: *fa-ḥaṭā ... turāb* / “[he] threw dust” (Aṭ-Ṭabarī, 1961, vol. II, p. 424; Aṭ-Ṭabarī, 1987, p. 32). Ibn Hišām, however, uses the term *naḥḥa* – “to throw” (Watt, 1956, p. 312). Watt (1956, p. 313) briefly mentions doubts regarding the problem I have discussed in this paper.

15 It should be noted that, especially in longer commentaries, authors typically present multiple versions of events known to them simultaneously.

p. 31¹⁶). In the latter case, the verb *ramā* acquires a metaphorical meaning and refers to ayat 12 of the same sūra: *sa-ulqī fī qulūbi āl-ladīna kafarū ār-ru'ba* ("I shall cast into the unbelievers' hearts terror").

In the context of the Battle of Ḥunayn, one encounters circumstances identical to those at Badr, including the invocation *šābat al-wuğūb* (Ibn al-'Arabī, 2003, p. 387; Al-Qurṭubī, 2006, p. 477; a slightly more detailed account: Al-Azharī, 2001, p. 190), and only pebbles/gravel are mentioned (*al-ḥaṣā*). It is puzzling, however, that classical lexicographic works in connection with this invocation only refer to the Battle of Ḥunayn.

The verb *ramā*, when used in a situation requiring an object, appears in the context of the Battle of Uḥud. There, the Prophet throws his spear and kills his fierce opponent. This story is cited by As-Samarqandī (1993, p. 11), Ibn al-'Arabī (2003, p. 388), Al-Qurṭubī (2006, p. 477), Al-Bayḍāwī (n.d., p. 54) who does not use the term *ḥarba* but *ṭa'na*, Ibn Kaṭīr (1997, p. 32) as well as by As-Suyūṭī (2011, p. 41). Thus, this version is relatively widespread, although – paradoxically – little known and not mentioned in any commentaries on translations of the Qur'an into other languages.

Finally, the last historical context is the Battle of Ḥaybar. In the accounts of this event included by Al-Qurṭubī (2006, p. 478), Al-Bayḍāwī (n.d., p. 54), Ibn Kaṭīr (1997, p. 31), and As-Suyūṭī (2011, p. 41), the verb *ramā* is used in a slightly different sense: "to shoot [with a bow]". From this meaning in medieval Arab culture, the derivatives *ramī* and *rimāya* arose to denote archery.¹⁷

It is worth noting that traditional archery was highly praised by the Prophet himself. He personally "had six bows: *Az-Zawra'* [The Curved One], *Ar-Rawḥa'* [The Ostrich], *As-Ṣafrā'* [The Yellow One], *Al-Bayḍā'* [The White One], *Al-Katūm* [The Silent One], which broke in battle of Uḥud and was taken by Qatāda Ibn an-Nu'mān and *As-Sadād* [the Perfect]" (Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyya, 2008, p. 43).¹⁸ The hadiths contain many accounts in which the Prophet praises archery, treating it as one of the most important skills of a Muslim. For example, in a hadith reported by As-Suyūṭī, we read, for example: "It is the child's right in relation to his father to be taught writing, swimming and archery" (As-Suyūṭī, 2011, p. 88). Shooting an enemy with a bow during *jihad*

16 The justification may be verse 8, 12: *sa-ulqī fī qulūb āl-ladīna kafarū ār-ru'ba* ("I shall cast into the unbelievers' hearts terror").

17 See, for example, the treatises of Ṭaybuḡā al-Aṣrafī (14th century) and Abū Ya'qūb al-Ḥāfiẓ (d. 1037/1038). Various terminological issues related to archery are discussed in detail by Ibn Sida (1996, pp. 25–43); particularly important are the instructions regarding archery itself, chapter *Ar-Ramī bi-ās-sibām* / "Shooting with a bow [lit.: using arrows]" (1996, pp. 41–42). Interestingly, some medieval lexicographers claimed that war begins with *at-tarāmī bi-as-sahm* ("shooting of arrows") (Schwartzlose, 1896, p. 58).

18 Issues relating to archery are discussed at length in the commentaries on verse 60 of surah *Al-Anfāl*.

is especially praised; even if the archer misses the target, he is closer to Paradise than other believers (As-Suyūṭī, 2011, p. 89).¹⁹

Interestingly, the version involving the arrow is preferred by Sufis, i.e., Muslim mystics. In the treatise *Fīhi mā fīhi* Ḡalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī (1207–1273) comments on this fragment: “The arrow that leaps from the bow of God, no shield or breastplate can stop” (Rūmī, 1378 H., p. 445; Rumi, 2000, p. 384).

There is no doubt that the act of throwing sand, pebbles, or gravel should be considered part of the Muslim tradition of a legendary nature, although this motif appears both in historical texts (e.g. Abū al-Fidā 1988, pp. 161, 183; Aṭ-Ṭabarī, 1961, vol. II, p. 449; vol. III, p. 78), and in the religious ones mentioned above. There is no need to elaborate on the interconnections between them here. The Prophet’s behavior during the Battles of Badr, Uḥud, Ḥaybar, and Ḥunayn should be regarded as one of the *topoi* characteristic of the early Arab-Muslim historiographic tradition. This phenomenon was explained by Albrecht Noth and Lawrence I. Conrad, describing a *topos* as:

a narrative motif which has as its primary function the specification of contents, and aims to elaborate matters of fact. Its scope is thus very narrow, and it is normally bound to description of a specific situation of a brief moment, or characterization of a person. A topos may very well have a basis in fact, for it is often the case that a topos was once surely anchored to real historical referents... . Such references move from the domain of life to that of literature, however, when they become transformable. The key to the detection of a topos is the way it drifts from one setting to another, reappearing again and again in situations to which it had never originally belonged, and indeed, never could have belonged. Topoi were sometimes used for mere embellishment or for literary effect, but also provided powerful means to promote certain distinct tendencies and biases (Noth & Conrad, 1994, p. 109).²⁰

However, while this may explain that the Prophet’s behavior may be related to several historical events, it does not clarify what actually happened, i.e., what Muḥammad threw (*ramā*), which will likely remain a mystery forever. Finally, it is worth considering how translators of the Qur’anic text dealt with this complicated issue.

19 As for bows in pre-Islamic times see Schwartzlose (1896, pp. 38–46, 246–319).

20 See also in the context of slightly later events Shoshan (2016).

The verb *ramā* in translations of the Qur'an

I analyses 30 translations into the following languages: English, German, French, Polish, Czech, Italian, Dutch, Lithuanian, Finnish, Russian, Ukrainian, Spanish, Bosnian, and Turkish. In the majority of these translations, translators limit themselves to a literal rendering of the lexeme under discussion, without offering any suggestions (Czachorowski, Bobzin, Khoury, Krackowski, Pickthall, Rodwell, Arberry, Elmalılı, Özek, Jakubowicz, Korkut, Melara Navio).

Some translators supplement the translation by indicating specifically sand or pebbles/gravel (Yusuf Ali, Grigull, Porochowa, Osmanow, Jakubauskas, Hamidullah). Others relegate such an explanation to a footnote (Verhoef, Bielawski, Henning, Hrbek). Contemporary Arab commentators of the *sūra* usually favor this interpretation (e.g. As-Sulṭān, 2012, p. 37; Šams ad-Dīn, 1982, p. 48; Aš-Ša'rāwī, 2016, p. 346).

In five of the translations under review, the translators disambiguated the message by directly pointing to the use of an arrow (Bausani, Hameen-Antilla, Kazimirski, Blachère, Shumovsky). The version with an arrow is additionally mentioned in a footnote by Paret, Henning, and Hrbek.

Savary's French translation avoids this problem: "Ce n'est pas toi, Mahomet, qui les assaillis; c'est Dieu," which is followed by Buczacki's Polish translation: "it was not you, Muhammad, who attacked them," which seems to be the best substantive solution to the situation. In this way, the ambiguity of the Arabic verb *ramā* is preserved: "attacked them" with sand, pebbles, gravel, a spear, or an arrow from a bow.

As one can see, in translations, three ways of rendering the verb *ramā* can be observed. First, a "neutral" approach, which leaves room for interpretation for the reader, just as it is in the original, although the lack of appropriate cultural background makes it impossible to decipher the meaning related to archery. At the same time, in the footnotes, many translators suggest the most popular interpretation, linking this fragment with the Battle of Badr and throwing sand/pebbles/gravel. None of the translators refer to any battle other than Badr, regardless of the interpretation of the lexeme *ramā*. Even those who translate *ramā* as "to shoot" do not go beyond the Badrian context, although the classical interpretation of exegetes always involves the Battle of Haybar. Nobody also considered spear throwing, so a reader unfamiliar with *tafsīrs* will never learn about this possible reading this ayat.²¹

21 Badawi and Abdel Haleem (2008, p. 384) provide the following translation: *and when you threw [pebbles/a spear] (or, aimed [an arrow or a spear] it was not you who threw, but God, therefore omitting the most popular version found in commentaries and translations, the one including sand/pebbles/gravel; this is unique, unlike in the case of Penrice, 1873, p. 69, who, in turn, includes only the version with gravel.*

Conclusions

The above analysis is further evidence of the “untranslatability of the Qur’an.” The original text itself, without commentary or annotations, does not suggest any specific interpretation, yet at the same time, all these versions are contained in it. It may even seem unclear, as if “unfinished.” Since perhaps no language other than Arabic allows the meanings of “throw” and “shoot” to be encompassed in a single verb, the translator must make a difficult choice: either to leave this conundrum in the translation (and, to a lesser extent, in the original) or attempt disambiguation, favoring one version of the story, even though there is no clear evidence that any of them is correct.

In this case, an interesting solution is Savary’s decision in the 1814 translation (the oldest considered here), which was adopted by the Polish “Buczacki’s Qur’an.” The French translator abandoned formal (linguistic) equivalence in any version and applied the principle of pragmatic equivalence. Any action of the Prophet that can be subsumed under the statement *mā ramayta ... walakinna Allāha ramā* is described as an “attack.” Although this solution is not ideal either: a too explicit “attack,” which is not formally present in the original, may raise doubts. But this is the phenomenon of untranslatability, which is especially acute in a religious text, where almost every word carries a mystery, more so than in the case of a purely literary text.

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