



BESMELLĀH II. IN EXEGESIS, JURISPRUDENCE, AND CULTURAL LIFE

ii. In Exegesis, Jurisprudence, and Cultural Life

It is not known when the formula first began to be used. Ṭabarī mentions an opinion that it was the first part of the Koran to be revealed, which was also the view of ‘Alī Wāḥedī Nīsābūrī in his *Asbāb al-nozūl*, but this is unlikely (Nöldeke, I, p. 115; Rāmyār, p. 556). The formula occurs in an abbreviated form in 11:41 (“He [Noah] said: “embark on it [the ark] in the name of God, whether it move or be at rest. . . .””) and in its full form in 27:30 (“It [a letter to the queen of Sheba] is from Solomon, and it is: “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful””); the latter occurrence can be placed in the mid-Meccan period. Some authorities are of the opinion that the Prophet began to use *besmellāh* after the revelation of 11:41; expanded the formula to *besmellāh al-raḥmān* after the revelation of 17:110 (“say: “call upon Allāh or call upon *al-raḥmān* . . .””); and gave it its final form after the revelation of 27:30 (Rāmyār, p. 556). Once this development was complete, the Prophet did not consider the revelation of any *sūra* complete until he was commanded to place the formula at its beginning.

The absence of *besmellāh* at the beginning of the ninth *sūra* (*al-Tawba* or *al-Barā’a*) has been variously explained. It is said that it originally formed a



single *sūra* with the eighth *sūra*, *al-Anfāl*, the whole being known as *Sūrat al-barā'a* (Soyūṭī, I, p. 65). Alternatively, Mālek b. Anas is quoted as saying that the ninth *sūra* was originally much longer (“as long as *al-Baqara*”), but then its initial portion, including the *bismellāh*, fell away (Soyūṭī, loc. cit.). Most widely accepted (e.g., by Anṣārī in *Maybodī*, IV, p. 60) is the view that the use of the *bismellāh* would have been inappropriate on this occasion, given the declaration of war on the polytheists with which it begins; thus ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭāleb said, “*Bismellāh* is security (*amān*), whereas *al-Barā'a* was revealed with a sword” (Soyūṭī, I, p. 65).

Opinion also differs on whether *bismellāh* is an introductory formula, serving to separate each *sūra* from the preceding one, or a verse in its own right. The *qorrā'* (Koran reciters) of Kūfa and Medina held it to be a separate verse at the beginning of every *sūra* (Rāmyār, p. 554). Shi'ites are of the same view, and Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādeq is related even to have described *bismellāh* as “the greatest verse in the Book of God” (Ayoub, p. 47). One consequence of this opinion is that the *bismellāh* becomes syntactically connected with the opening statement of each *sūra*, so that it acquires a subtly different meaning at each occurrence. Hanafites deny that *bismellāh* is ever a verse, and Shafe'ites grant it that status only at the beginning of *Sūrat al-fāteḥa* (Kufralī, p. 569).

All authorities agree that the recitation of any portion of the Koran must be introduced with the utterance of *bismellāh*; *some regard it as permissible to utter it only at the beginning of a recitation including more than one sūra. Bismellāh is never pronounced aloud in the prayer, even at the beginning of Sūrat al-fāteḥa, since it was not the practice of the Prophet to do so (Ṣaḥīḥ Moslem; Ketāb al-ṣalāt, Hadiths 786-89).*

The Prophet is reported to have described the *bismellāh* as the foundation (*asās*) of *Sūrat al-fāteḥa*, itself the foundation of the Koran, which is in turn the foundation of all revealed books (quoted in *Maybodī*, I, p. 9). The meanings and properties of the formula have accordingly been discussed in great detail by exegetes of all schools, especially Sufis. Foreshadowing the theories of Ebn al-'Arabī, Qoṣayrī (d. 465/1072) remarked that the *bā'* in *bismellāh* means that all things are created and exist by means of the name of God. The inclusion of *esm* (name) in the formula is either to distinguish it from an oath or to aid in purifying the heart of the reciter before he utters the word *Allāh*. The three letters of which *besm* is composed can, moreover, be taken as the initials of various divine qualities; the qualities they indicate are different on each



occasion, depending on the content of the sura *bismellāh* introduces (*Laṭā'ef al-ešārāt* I, p. 44).

Anṣārī took *bismellāh* to mean “I [God] begin and continue in My own name; begin and continue then, you too, in My name.” He considered “name” in *bismellāh* to be superfluous in that the name and the entity named are, in this case, identical in the view of the people of insight (*ahl-e ḥaqq*). Drawing attention to the nineteen letters of which the formula is composed, Anṣārī also suggested that each of them serves as a protection against one of the nineteen guardians of hellfire (Maybodī I, pp. 4-5).

Because of the morphological affinity seen to exist between the Koran and the created universe, Ebn al-'Arabī declared that *bismellāh* is the predicate of an implied subject, i.e., “the world appeared by means of the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful” (*al-Fotūḥāt al-makkīya* I, p. 103). The *bā'* in *besm* is an indication of the First Intelligence (*al-'aql al-awwal*), the agent of manifestation, and the dot beneath it is an indication of the separation of the worshipper (*'ābed*) from the object of worship (*ma'būd*; *Tafsīr al-Qor'ān al-Karīm* I, p. 8). *As for the alef of esm, always omitted in the writing of the bismellāh, this points to the hidden presence in creation of the One Who sustains it (al-qā'em be'l-koll ta'ālā). The complete formula also indicates the chain of the prophets, besm referring to Adam and al-raḥīm to Moḥammad (al-Fotūḥāt al-makkīya* I, p. 102).

Similar interpretations based on cosmogony and letter symbolism can be found in the *Baḥr al-ḥaqā'eq* of Najm-al-Dīn Kobrā (d. 617/1220) and in the *Ejāz al-bayān fī ta'wīl omm al-Qor'ān* (Hyderabad, 1949, pp. 85-224) of Ebn al-'Arabī's pupil Ṣadr-al-Dīn Qūnavī (d. 673/1274).

Shi'ite commentaries uniformly cite sayings of the imams—especially 'Alī b. Abī Ṭāleb, Moḥammad al-Bāqer, and Ja'far al-Ṣādeq—concerning the virtues of *bismellāh* and the necessity of uttering it on a variety of occasions. Some also take up the concerns of Ebn 'Arabī and his school. A recent example is furnished by the lectures of Ayatollah Komeynī on *Sūrat al-fāteḥa* in the course of which he suggests that the *bā'* in *bismellāh* signifies “by means of” rather than “in.” In keeping with the Shi'ite view that *bismellāh* is always a verse, syntactically connected to what follows upon it, he further remarks that its occurrence at the beginning of *Sūrat al-fāteḥa* means that “all instances of praise, by whomever uttered, are accomplished by the name of God; it is the name itself that produces the utterance” (*Tafsīr-e Sūra-ye ḥamd*, pp. 18, 32).



The ascription to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭāleb of the saying, “I am the dot beneath the *bā*’ of *besmellāh*,” found in some Shi‘ite commentaries, is dubious, given the fact that the dots had not been introduced into Arabic orthography during his lifetime (Ateş, p. 320). The same utterance has, moreover, been attributed to the Sufi Abū Bakr Šebli (d. 334/945; *al-Fotūḥāt al-makkīya* I, p. 102).

Outside of the Koran, *besmellāh* was used by the Prophet to introduce almost all written communications and documents (Hamidullah, *passim*). That this diverged sharply from the pre-Islamic usage of the Arabs is apparent from the insistence of Sohayl b. ‘Amr, on behalf of the Qorayš, that the treaty of Ḥodaybīa be introduced with the traditional formula *besmeka Allāhomma* (in Your name, o God), rather than the distinctively Islamic *besmellāh* (Ebn Hešām, II, p. 317). In keeping with the precedent set by the Prophet, almost all types of writing have been headed with the *besmellāh*, although in early times some authorities objected to placing it in front of poetry (Kufralı, p. 569). Sometimes an equivalent formula omitting the name *Allāh*—such as *besmehe ta‘ālā* (in His name, may He be exalted!)—is used, out of fear that a piece of paper on which *besmellāh* is written might fall to the ground or be treated with irreverence.

Hadiths found in both Sunni and Shi‘ite collections prescribe the utterance of *besmellāh* before embarking on a wide variety of everyday acts such as coition, eating, mounting a riding beast, putting on clothes, and entering a dwelling. Shi‘ite *feqh*, together with all the Sunni schools except the Hanbalite, regard the pronouncement of *besmellāh* as desirable (*mostaḥabb*) when starting one’s ablutions. Koran 6:119 forbids the eating of food over which the name of God has not been pronounced; this is commonly seen as restricting the permission, given in 5:4, to eat food prepared by the People of the Book.

A well-known Hadith promises abundant blessings to those who write *besmellāh* beautifully (quoted in Schimmel, p. 3); it has accordingly been a favorite subject of calligraphers in almost every period. Sometimes it has been artfully written in pictorial form to depict birds and other creatures. A well-executed *besmellāh* is a frequent feature of architectural ornamentation, particularly over the prayer niches and gateways of mosques.

The Persian rendering of the formula given in the anonymous 4th/10th-century translation of Ṭabarī’s commentary on the Koran (*Tarjama-ye tafsīr-e Ṭabarī* I, p. 10), *be nām-e kodā-ye mehrbān-e baḳšāyanda*, has remained fairly standard down to the present, although Maybodī’s commentary and



translation (*Kašf al-asrār wa 'oddāt al-abrār*), based on the instructions of K̄vāja 'Abd-Allāh Anṣārī (d. 481/1089), renders *besmellāh* as *be nām-e kodāvand-e farāk-bakšāyeš-e mehrbān*. For the uses of *besmellāh* in Persian language and literature see [Dehḳodā](#).

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