



# ON WAHY AND EPILEPSY

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There have been several references made in the past, in the western (mostly European) literature, that the prophet of Islam, Muhammad (Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon him), suffered from epilepsy. Most of the writers who talked about epilepsy, e.g. Theophanes,<sup>1</sup> Campanella,<sup>2</sup> Dostovesky,<sup>3</sup> Humphrey Prideaux,<sup>4</sup> were theologians, historians or other writers, and not physicians. Nevertheless, some physicians in their writings appear to have accepted this label of epilepsy, e.g. Noldeke.<sup>5</sup> However, recently a professor of neurology attempted a differential diagnosis of the inspirational experiences of Muhammad<sup>6</sup> (Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon him).

The present paper purports to discuss some aspects of this article and draws parallel between epilepsy and these inspirational experiences that are known to Muslims as Wahy. This is not an attempt to prove or disprove that Wahy is a form of epileptic phenomenon.

**What is Wahy.** This is an experience of divine revelation known to the Prophets. In stricter sense of the word, it is the true and original word of God, Almighty. The best description is obtained from the following two examples:

1. Nor does he say (aught) of his own desire  
It is no less than inspiration sent down to him  
Al-Quran-Sura Najm (LIII) Ayah  
3rd & 4th<sup>7</sup>
2. "and will put My words into his mouth and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him to."  
Deuteronomy 18:18<sup>8</sup>

That is to say that the words uttered by the prophet do not belong to him, but to God Almighty. As Muslims, we know that all prophets received Wahy in one form or another. About Prophet Mohammad (Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon him), there have been described several different ways by which God's message was transferred to him.

The following are abstracted from Quran-el-Kareem and Hadith:

1. True dreams. (Ruyaa-e-Sadequa)

2. Impression on the heart & memory. (Nafasa Fir-Raua of Ilqa Fil-Qalb)
3. Sound resembling that of a bell. (Salsalat-el-Jars)
4. Angel Gabriel appearing in human form. (Tamassul)
5. Angel Gabriel appearing in his own true form.
6. Direct message in the presence of Almighty (in Meraj).
7. Indirect message. (Hafez Ibn-Queem).<sup>9</sup>

That these are not auditory or visual hallucinations is borne out by the fact that Sahih Hadith has described the appearance of a man witnessed by the attending Sahabah during Wahy,<sup>10</sup> when Angel Gabriel appeared to Prophet Mohammad in the form of a man. We do not have eye-witness accounts of Wahy experiences of prophets other than Prophet Mohammad, so our discussion is necessarily confined to his Wahy experiences. This Wahy has been called "Wahy Matlu" as opposed to "Wahy Ghair Matlu" which are sayings of the prophet himself and, because we consider his own words also inspired by Allah Taala, therefore, the concept of Wahy in Islam seems to be widened.

Speaking therefore of Wahy conditions, I have collected the following abstracts from descriptions given in accepted Hadith only:

1. "He would lie down" (through Ayesha-Allah be pleased with her).
2. "Beads of sweat would appear on his forehead even during cold weather" (Ayesha-Allah be pleased with her).
3. "His body would become extremely heavy" (Zaid bin Thabet-Allah be pleased with him).
4. "His face got red and he appeared to sleep" (Ya'all bin Omayya-Allah be pleased with him).
5. "Color of his face would change and he would appear restless and he would drop his face and so did we, until it was over and then he would raise his head and so would we" (Ibadah bin Samet-Allah be pleased with him).

Descriptions of falling and fainting have only been seen in European literature, but Muslim writers do not describe such events. Since direct conversation

between God and man occurred during *meraj* (ascension) and all the events of *Isra* (or night journey) form a distinct aspect of the life history of Prophet Mohammad (Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon him), and have tremendous theologic significance. I shall not describe it in detail. Suffice it to say here that some controversies amongst the Muslim writers have led the European writers to confusion even though "Ascension" is not alien to the Christian understanding. Many have called it a mere dream while others considered it a "peculiar mystic experience" or an epileptic attack during sleep.

**Epilepsy:** This brings us to the present day concepts of epilepsy. Before defining temporal lobe epilepsy or psychomotor epilepsy or partial epilepsy with complex symptomatology, it seems appropriate that some historical notes on epilepsy be reviewed.

Before Christ and even after Christ, for a long time, epilepsy in general was considered either a "sacred disease" or a "possession" by a devil or spirit. The boundaries between hysteria, melancholy, madness and epilepsy were less distinct. It is likely that biblical phraseology influenced the Christian mind in their writings of epilepsy. For instance:

"Lord, do have pity on my son, for he is a lunatic and is in a terrible state. He is always falling into fire or into the water. I did bring him to the disciples, but they couldn't cure him." (Matthew 17:14).<sup>11</sup>

Or the Gospel of Mark explains that the evil spirits of "Legion" were ordered out of the boy by Jesus<sup>12</sup> (Peace be upon him).

Here the words lunatic and epileptic are used interchangeably or synonymously. For instance, a Latin interpreter of Bu-Ali Sena (Avicenna) interprets "insane person" (Al-insan-ul-Majnoonu) as "epileptic".<sup>13</sup> This is particularly true of concept of epilepsy during medieval times, especially in Europe.

Real neurologic understanding, however, was firmly established only when Hulings Jackson in 1880 described the epileptic convulsion.<sup>14</sup> Concepts of "Temporal Lobe Epilepsy" are more recent and of necessity have developed after the advent of Electroencephalography. This concept took shape gradually from 1941 to 1948 or so, (H. Gastaut) when it was accepted that the seat of psychomotor epilepsy was in the temporal lobes.<sup>15</sup> These two terms became synonymous until it was found that the epileptic focus may lie in parietal or frontal or occipital lobe, in addition to temporal lobe and the clinical result is still what we call a psychomotor attack. This problem was solved in 1970 with the modern International Classification of Epilepsies, wherein the psychomotor variety has been classed as a "Partial Epilepsy with Complex Symptomatology".<sup>16</sup> This is more commonly called "Partial Complex Seizure". Many of the well-known auras are therefore now included in the

seizure. The descriptions of such seizures are well known to the physicians, but I shall briefly outline an attack.

The patient suddenly changes his usual expression, looks dazed or perplexed or sometimes fearful, and thus has partial loss of consciousness. Then he may experience a series of sensory motor phenomena resulting in a co-ordinated or quasi-coordinated form of complex movements or he may appear to hallucinate. As time proceeds, he may stop and come out of the attack in a few minutes or may develop unconsciousness and fall with generalized tonic clonic convulsions. (This is called secondary generalization). The patient has usually no recollection of what transpired during the attack. If the patient can relate everything that happens during attack, it throws serious doubt on the diagnosis of epilepsy. Many a time during the attack, there are autonomic accompaniments such as generalized perspiration, incontinence of urine and sometimes incontinence of stool.

**Discussion:** It should be stated from the start that normal and even superior intelligence can and does occur in epileptics and there has been a steady improvement in public attitudes towards epileptics even as recently as in the last three decades.<sup>17</sup> Now turning to the common features in a psychomotor attack and the condition during descension of Wahy (as described for Prophet Muhammad) they are:

1. Altered state of consciousness.
2. Complex sensory motor experiences.
3. Autonomic accompaniments.

Most characteristic autonomic disturbance associated with epileptic attack is loss of control of urinary bladder or expulsion of other excreta and this has not been reported in any of the Wahy conditions described. Beads of perspiration, though autonomic in nature (during cold weather) can and always accompany any of the non-epileptic phenomena such as vasovagal attack, agonizing experience of any kind, eating hot food or ordinary food (gustatory reflex). We therefore cannot consider this as a significant feature. The first two conditions, however, are common to both the epileptic phenomenon and Wahy experience.

Postical amnesia is the most characteristic feature of a seizure. Whereas, in Wahy we see a complete contrast, as Rasulullah (Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon him) not only remembered the events, but also had the whole wording during that time memorized and was ready to dictate. I shall not discuss the significance of contents of the memorized words that we, the Muslim physicians, know so well and is part of our faith (Iman) which is not under discussion here, but that also is an argument against epileptic phenomenon. (Temkin)<sup>18</sup>

Another important feature of temporal lobe epilepsy is the effect on the personality of the patient. In the present day knowledge and understanding of the epileptic phenomenon we must differentiate the generalized epilepsy (e.g. Grand Mal Epilepsy) from partial epilepsy with complex symptomatology, especially that where temporal lobe is involved. It is clear that Grand Mal Epilepsy is not generally associated with mental and personality deterioration whereas temporal lobe epilepsy is considered to have significant association (Gastaut)<sup>19</sup> Admittedly there are controversies on this subject and also present work seems to suggest that such psychiatric problems as schizophrenia-like psychosis, especially in the interictal phase,<sup>20</sup> may be related to left temporal lobe lesions rather than right or non-dominant hemisphere temporal lobe focus.<sup>21</sup> Without going into such details and without discussing personality traits such as hyper-religiosity, aggressiveness,<sup>22</sup> etc., we must consider the presence or absence of psychiatric disorders in the individual whose episodes resemble temporal lobe disorder. There are no psychiatric diagnoses given in the personalities of any of the prophets, though some European writers have, without any basis, referred to Prophet Muhammad as having "nervous disposition" but these expressions are more representative of the biased notions of the writers (all of them non-physicians) than an attempt at a psychological or psychiatric analysis. Consideration of complex partial seizure as explanation of Wahy, therefore, calls for inappropriate stretch of imagination.

Isra and Meraj-un-Nabl. This experience is referred to as epileptic phenomenon mainly in the light of non-medical reference, especially that of Dostovski and some epileptic characters of his novels.<sup>23</sup> (Prince Mishkin). Unfortunately, his imaginative genius has produced incorrect and fuzzy boundaries between his own epileptic attacks that were of Grand Mal type and those of his characters that were supposedly partial complex type.<sup>15</sup> Another phenomenon of "ecstasy"<sup>15</sup> has been brought up by his descriptions that the non-Muslim writers have presumed to have been experienced by Rasoolullah (Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon him). However, the question here is could or should the "Meraj" experience be considered an epileptic attack. This raises intriguing possibilities and I propose to discuss it separately in another article. I feel that this phenomenon is beyond comprehension as far as present day knowledge of neurology, psychology, mysticism, etc., are concerned and therefore defies explanation in such terms.

Inspirational experiences of different persons are different, but basically involve hearing of voice or sound, sometimes visual perception of a form or figure with altered state of consciousness. There are a large number of persons who have claimed to be prophets of

God according to their own impression of what God is like or what a "presence" should look like and it usually reflects the cultural and religious background of such a person. I have refrained from bringing into discussion the analysis of inspirational experiences of other personalities such as Paul, Joseph Smith (Mormonism) and Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. Some persons' writings, poetic, (e.g. Iqbal) or otherwise, have been considered inspired and some psychology books refer to these as "forced writing".<sup>24</sup> In this connection, however, I must mention that there is a recent report of partial complex seizures that involves a so-called prophetess Ellen White, of Seventh Day Adventist movement.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, the label of prophet is very loosely applied to many people in the Christian world. In addition, a host of self-styled prophets have continued to appear in both Christian and Muslim history and still abound in various parts of the world. This is not to say that other sane and elevated pious men may be inspired by God or scriptures or by both, but this is not really "The words of God put into the mouth of man". If, therefore, we follow our belief that all prophets who experienced Wahy were receiving the word of Allah in a similar fashion, it becomes then difficult to assume that all of them, that is Abraham, Moses, Jesus (Peace be upon all of them) were actually experiencing temporal lobe attacks.

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