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9. Evidence Based on the Literal Sense of the Qur'an

Synopsis: Demonstration of the evidential nature of the literal meanings of the Qur'an; the arguments of those who deny it, and their falsification; understanding the Qur'an is limited to those whom it addresses; the inference of the literal meaning by means of an exegesis based on personal judgment (*ray*); ambiguities in the import of the Qur'an are obstacles to comprehending it; recourse to meanings that contradict the literal meanings of the Qur'an invalidates the evidential character of those meanings; the prohibition to follow the ambiguous verses invalidates the evidential nature of the literal meanings of the Qur'an.

Undoubtedly, the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) did not invent for himself a special way to explain his intentions. He communicated with his people through the ways of explaining and speaking to which they were accustomed. He brought the Qur'an in order that they would understand its meanings and reflect on its verses, so they could carry out its injunctions and be restrained by its threats. This purpose of the Qur'an is stated repeatedly in the Qur'an itself. Thus, God, the Exalted, says:

Will they then not meditate on the Qur'an, or are there locks on their hearts? (Qur'an 47:24). And verily we have coined for mankind in this Qur'an all kinds of similitudes, that, haply, they may reflect (Qur'an 39:27). And lo! it is a revelation of the Lord of the Worlds. Which the True Spirit has brought down, upon your heart, that you may be [one] of the warners, in plain Arabic speech (Qur'an 26: 192–195). This is a declaration for humankind, a guidance and an admonition to those who ward off [evil] (Qur'an 3: 138). And We have made [this Scripture] easy in your language only that they may heed (Qur'an 44:58). And in truth We have made the Qur'an easy to remember; but is there anyone that remembers? (Qur'an 54: 17). Will they not then ponder on the Qur'an? If it had been from other than God, they would have found therein much incongruity (Qur'an 4:82).

These are only some examples of Qur'anic verses that point to the obligation of acting upon the injunctions in the Qur'an, and to the necessity to adhere to what is understood from its apparent

meanings.

Among the factors that support the evidential nature of the apparent meanings of the Qur'an, and the ability of the Arabs to understand their intention, are the following:

- 1. The Qur'an was revealed as proof of the messengership of the Prophet, and the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) challenged all humankind to produce the like of at least one sura of it. This corroborates the fact that the Arabs understood the objectives of the Qur'an from its apparent meanings. Had the Qur'an been a riddle, it would have been inappropriate to call upon them to counter it, nor would its inimitability have been established for them, because they would not have been able to understand it. This is certainly contrary to the purpose of revealing the Qur'an and calling the people to believe in it.
- 2. The well-known traditions commanding people to adhere to "the two things of high estimation" (*thaqalayn*), which the Prophet left among the Muslims, clearly demonstrate that the meaning of "adherence" to the Book is to follow it and to act upon its contents. It could not have had any other meaning.
- 3. There are numerous sound traditions that demand that traditions should be com pared to the Qur'an, and that any that disagree with it should be discarded and regarded as invalid or vain; or the people should be forbidden to accept them; or the leading compilers [of the traditions] did not transmit them. These traditions explicitly establish the evidential nature of the apparent meanings of the Qur'an, and that its apparent sense is comprehensible to all linguists who are competent in Arabic. Among these traditions are those which demand that the very prerequisites for a sound tradition should be examined in the light of the Book of God, and those of them that do not comply with it should be rejected.
- 4. Inferences from Qur'anic verses were used by the Imams (peace be upon them) in their legal and other rulings. Among these are [the following]:
- a. The opinion of the Imam al-Sadiq (peace be upon him) when Zurara asked him how he knew that wiping [*mash*, in the ablution] was to be performed only on part of the head: The Imam replied, "[Because of the] position of [the preposition] *bi*."1
- b. His opinion [expressed when] admonishing the Abbasid Caliph al-Manur against accepting the information given by a slanderer: "Such a man is an evil liver, and God, the Exalted, said: 'If an evil liver brings you tidings, verify it lest you smite some folk in ignorance" (Qur'an 49:6).
- c. His opinion regarding a person who prolongs sitting in the lavatory to listen to the musical performance [in the neighborhood], with the excuse that he had not come to it for that purpose. He [al-Sadiq] reminded him: "Have you not heard what God, the Exalted, said: 'Lo! the hearing and the sight and the heart--of each of these will be asked'" (Qur'an 17:36).
- d. His opinion [expressed to] his son Isma'il: "When the believers testify to you, then believe them, in

accordance with what God, the Exalted, has said, '... who believes in God, and is true to the believers ... " (Qur'an 9:61).

- e. His opinion regarding the lawfulness of a slave marrying a thrice-divorced woman: "He is a husband, and God, the Exalted, has said, 'Until she has wedded another husband" (Qur'an 2:230).2
- f. His opinion regarding the view that a woman who has been divorced three times does not become lawful [to her first husband] through a temporary marriage ('aqd munqati'): "God, the Exalted, says, 'Then if he [the other husband] divorces her, it is no sin for both of them that they come together again' (Qur'an 2:230); and in a temporary (mut'a) marriage, there is no divorce."3
- g. His opinion regarding the person whose nail was caused to fall and who had covered his toe with a tourniquet (*mirara*), [thus impeding the wiping required in ablution]: "[The solution to] this [condition] and its like is known from the Book of God, which states: 'He has not laid upon you in religion any hardship"" (Qur'an 22:78).
- h. His opinion that it is lawful to marry some of the women, in which he cited the following verse of the Qur'an: "Lawful to you are all beyond those mentioned" (Qur'an 4:24).
- i. His opinion that it is not permissible for a slave to marry [without the permission of his master], [an opinion] which he based on what God said: "A [mere] chattel slave has control of nothing" (Qur'an 16:75).
- j. His opinion that it is lawful to eat certain animals, which he based on what God said: "Say, I find not in that which is revealed to me anything prohibited to an eater that he eat thereof, [except if it be carrion, or blood poured forth, or swine flesh]" (Qur'an 6: 146).

These are some of the examples of the inferences the Imams made from the verses of the Qur'an. They are quoted in the appropriate chapters of the books on jurisprudence and in other types of works as well.

Arguments against the Evidential Nature of the Apparent Meanings of the Qur'an

A group of traditionists (*mubaddithun*) has taken a different view of this matter, has denied the evidential nature of the apparent meanings of the Qur'an, and has forbidden acting upon it. The group has based its argument on the following points:

1. The principle of election for the understanding of the Qur'an. According to this argument, the understanding of the Qur'an is limited to those to whom it was addressed. The [traditionists] supported this claim with a number of traditions on this subject. Among these is the mursal tradition, 4 related by Shu'ayb b. Anas, about the Imam al– Sadiq (peace be upon him), who is reported to have asked Abu hlanifa:

"Are you the jurist of the people oflraq?" He said, "Yes." The Imam asked, "On what do you base your legal opinions to them?" He replied, "On the Book of God and the practice (*sunna*) of His Prophet." The Imam asked, "O Abu Hanifa! Do you know the Book of God as it should be known? And do you recognize the abrogating verses from the abrogated verses?" He said, "Yes." The Imam said: "Woe unto you, O Abu Hanifa! You have claimed a knowledge which God has placed in none other than those upon whom He revealed the Book. Woe unto you, He did not place such knowledge except with the selected ones among the progeny of our Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny). Moreover, God, the Exalted, has not bequeathed on you even a word."

In another tradition, Zayd b. al-Shahham reports:

Qatada came to see Abu Ja'far [al-Baqir] (peace be upon him). The Imam asked him, "Are you the jurist of the people of Basra?" He replied, "So they claim." The Imam said, "It has reached me that you interpret (tufassir) the Qur'an." He said, "Yes." [The conversation went on] until the Imam said: "O Qatada, if you explain the Qur'an on the basis of your own opinion, then, indeed, you are doomed and have caused others to be doomed. And if you explain it on the basis of the opinions of the transmitters of tradition (*al-rijal*), then, too, you are doomed and have caused others to be doomed. O Qatada, woe unto you! The Qur'an is known to those to whom it has been addressed."

The response [to this is as follows]. Surely, the purport of these and other such traditions is to convey the fact that the understanding of the Qur'an as it should be understood, and the knowledge of its apparent and hidden meanings, and of its abrogating and abrogated verses, are limited to those to whom it was addressed. The first tradition is explicit in conveying this purport, for the Imam's question deals with the precise knowledge about the Book of God, about the distinction between the abrogating and the abrogated verses. Accordingly, the Imam's rebuke to Abu Hanifa was for claiming this kind of precise knowledge. As for the second tradition, it includes the term tafsir (to interpret, make an exegesis), which means "uncovering the veil," and as such, does not refer to the literal sense of the text because that is not something hidden and that needs to be unveiled. This interpretation of the tradition is construed from other explicit traditions that speak about the comprehension of the Book not being limited only to the Infallible Imams (peace be upon them). In addition, the statement of the Imam al-Sadig (peace be upon him), in which he says, "God has not bequeathed on you even a word," conveys this sense, because it means that God has favored the legatees of His Prophet with the bequest of the Book. Significantly, this is the meaning of God's saving that "then We gave the Book as inheritance to those whom We elected our bondmen" (Qur'an 35:32). Those are the ones divinely chosen to understand the Qur'an as it really is, and others besides them have no share in it. This is indeed the meaning of [what the Imam said] in the first of the two traditions. Otherwise, is it reasonable to maintain that Abu Hanifa did not know anything about the Book of God, even God's saying that "say, He is God, the One" (Qur'an 111:1), and about other verses like this, which are clear in their meaning? The traditions that indicate the abovementioned [principle of] election are numerous, and some of them have already been cited.

2. The prohibition to interpret the Qur'an according to one's personal judgment (ra'y). According to this argument, abiding by the apparent meaning of the text is a form of interpreting (tafsir) the Qur'an on the basis of one's personal opinion. This has been forbidden, as is attested by the uninterruptedly transmitted traditions by the Sunnis and Shi'ites.

The response [to this is as follows]. The term *tafsir*, as mentioned earlier, means "uncovering the veil." As such, tafsir does not connote an explanation of the literal meaning of the text, for, being unconcealed, the literal meaning is not in need of being uncovered. And, even if we concede that explaining the literal meaning involves tafsir, it is certainly not tafsir on the basis of one's personal opinion; hence, it is not the type of tafslr prohibited by the uninterruptedly transmitted traditions. Rather, it is tafsir in the sense in which the term is ordinarily understood. Thus, for instance, if someone were to expound on one of the orations of Nahj al-Balagha [The Peak of Eloquence] in terms of how the words are commonly understood, as well as in accordance with both the connected and separate contexts, then such an endeavor would not be regarded as an interpretation through one's personal opinion (tafsir bil-ra'y). The Imam al-Sadig alluded to this when he said: 'The [interpretations of the] ambiguous verses have led some people to their doom because they did not understand their meanings, nor did they know the truth about them. Thus, they invented interpretations for them that were based on their personal opinions, and regarded themselves as not in need of inquiring about them from the legatees [of the Prophet] who would have apprised them." It is possible that *tafsir bil-ra'y* means formulating independent legal opinions without referring to the Imams (peace be upon them), in spite of their being affiliated with the Book of God in the obligation concerning the adherence [to the two things of high estimation (althagalayn) and the necessity of ultimately referring the text to them [for an exclusive verdict]. If a person acts upon the general or the absolute injunctions of the Qur'an, and does not accept the particularizations or restrictions reported on the authority of the Imams, then this is regarded as an interpretation on the basis of one's own personal judgment (tafsir bil ra'y). In short, explaining a text according to its literal sense, after careful evaluation of the connected and separate contexts in the Book and the Sunna (prophetic tradition), or on the basis of a rational argument, is not considered interpretation on the basis of one's personal opinion, nor even plain interpretation as explained earlier. However, the abovementioned traditions indicate the need to turn to the Book and to act upon its directives. It is evident that the intention in referring people to the Qur'an is that they should submit to its literal meanings. As such, interpretation on the basis of one's own personal judgment must mean something other than acting in accordance with the literal meanings of the various textual and contextual evidence provided by the Qur'an, the Sunna, and reasoning.

3. *The obscurities in the meanings of the Qur'an*. In the Qur'an there are lofty meanings and obscure objectives. As such, these are obstacles to the understanding of its meanings, and to the comprehension of what it intends to convey. We find that the works of some early Muslim scholars are not understood except by well–informed scholars. How, then, can one understand the meanings of the Qur'an, which comprises the entire knowledge about the matters pertaining to the beginning and the end of the World?

The response [to this is as follows]. Although the Qur'an includes all the knowledge about the beginning and the end of existence, and although the knowledge about this aspect of the Qur'an is undoubtedly restricted to the *ahl al-bayt* of the Prophet, this does not nullify the fact that the Qur'an has an apparent sense that can be understood by anyone who is well versed in the Arabic language and its style of expression, and who could thus perform his devotions in accordance with the apparent meanings of the Qur'an, after scrutinizing the context.

4. The knowledge that the intention is different from the apparent meanings. We know, in general, that the general injunctions of the Qur'an have been particularized, and that the absolute ones have been restricted. We also know that some of the meanings of the Qur'an are definitely not intended in their apparent sense. However, it is not known which of the general injunctions are particularized in their application, and which of the absolute ones are restricted, and which of the apparent meanings are not necessarily intended as they appear; hence, it is not possible to be bound by their applicability and meaning. Consequently, the apparent meanings of the Qur'an, and its general and absolute injunctions, are all part of the exposition, though they are not all part of the fundamental tenets. Hence, it is not proper to act upon them, lest one might inadvertently act against their reality.

The response [to this is as follows]. This summary knowledge can hinder a person from adhering to the literal meanings of the Qur'an only if a person intends to act upon them without first examining the sense they convey. However, after seeking and obtaining the level of knowledge whose existence among the apparent meanings is already ascertained by the believer, the problem of summary knowledge is resolved. Consequently, it can by no means be regarded as summary knowledge, leaving the believer without any restriction of acting upon the apparent meanings of the Qur'an. The same applies to the sunna of the Prophet. There, we determine the qualifications imposed on the general ordinances, and the restrictions on the absolute ones. Thus, if the summary knowledge hinders a person from adhering to the literal sense of the Qur'an even when this problem of summary knowledge has been resolved, it would have to be a hindrance in acting upon the apparent meanings of the sunna. Indeed, it would hinder the implementation of the principle of exemption in the performance of ambiguous injunctions, whether they set down obligatory or forbidden acts. This is because all the believers know about the existence of obligations in the sacred law. The corollary of this summary knowledge is the obligation of being cautious in implementing all the obscure injunctions, whether they pertain to prohibitions or obligations, though there may be no certainty that this caution is necessary. It is true that a number of traditionists have ruled that it is incumbent to act with caution in regard to obscure injunctions pertaining to prohibitions. This, however, is because they imagined that those traditions that order the believers to suspend judgment or to apply caution indicate that it is incumbent to be cautious or to withhold an opinion in regard to these ambiguous injunctions. Certainly, this opinion of theirs does not stem from their summary knowledge of the existence of required obligations in the Shari'a; otherwise, it would have been necessary for them to maintain that it was obligatory to apply precautionary measures even to ambiguous injunctions that pertain to obligations. However, we know of no one among them who has ruled thus. The reason that it is not necessary to exercise caution in this or other similar instances is that

the problem of summary knowledge had been resolved with the acquisition of the possible level of information, and once it is resolved, it ceases to be effective. For further information on this subject, the reader is referred to our book on the principles of jurisprudence, entitled *Ajwad al–Taqrirat*.

5. Prohibition to follow the ambiguous verses. The verses of the Qur'an forbid the believers to act upon the ambiguous ordinances, in accordance with what God, the Exalted, says: "Itis He who sent down upon thee the Book wherein are clear (muhkamat) revelations—they are the substance of the Book—and others [which are] ambiguous (mutashabihat). But those in whose hearts is doubt pursue, forsooth, that which is ambiguous, seeking [to cause] dissension by seeking to explain it . . ." (Qur'an 3:7). The ambiguous verses, they maintain, include the apparent meaning; indeed, the least that can be said about them is that they include the literal meanings of the Qur'an. Thus, the evidential nature of the apparent dimension of the Qur'an cannot be maintained.

The response [to this is as follows]. The word *mutashabih* (ambiguous, multivalent) is clear in meaning, and there is no [characteristic of] summation or ambiguity about it. The word means that a word or an expression bears two or more meanings and that all these meanings are equally applicable to it. Thus, if the word is used, it would be possible that any of these meanings is intended. One should therefore suspend judgment until an indication points to the correct meaning. Accordingly, an expression that carries a literal sense cannot be regarded as *mutashabih*, that is, allegorical or ambiguous.

If we concede that the word *mutashabih* is itself ambiguous, and may have a literal meaning, this would not be a cause for preventing a person from acting upon its apparent sense, especially when the established custom among the wise persons is to follow the apparent meanings of the words. For the possibility of its being nothing more than that is not an impediment for acting upon it on the basis of the established custom. To forbid that, it is necessary to establish absolute evidence to the contrary; otherwise, it must, without doubt, be followed. It is for this reason that the Master (God) can remonstrate with His servant if the latter disobeys the ostensible sense of His words, and it is appropriate for Him to punish His servant for his disobedience. In the same vein, the servant himself can protest against his Master if he heeds the literal sense of his Master's words, when this literal sense happens to be contrary to His purpose. In short, this established custom is to be followed in adhering to the literal meanings until absolute proof is established to prevent it.

6. Occurrence of Tahrif (alteration) in the Qur'an. The occurrence of alteration (corruption of the text) in the Qur'an is an impediment to act upon its apparent sense, because of the possibility of these literal meanings being connected to a context that would have conveyed its actual intention, but which has been deleted because of the alteration.

The response [to this is as follows]. The occurrence of *tahrif* in the Qur'an has been disproved, as demonstrated by our discussion earlier in this book. There, we mentioned that the traditions that order the believers to refer to the Qur'an are, in themselves, the proof regarding the absence of *tahrif*. If we were to relinquish this view, the corollary would be that the traditions impose the obligation to act in

accordance with the Qur'an even with the likelihood of alterations having occurred. The conclusion of what has been said so far is that it is necessary to act upon the ostensible meanings of the Qur'an, and it is the foundation of the Shari'a, and one cannot act in accordance with the narrated traditions if they contradict the Qur'an.

- 1. The reference here is to the phrase "and rub your faces," which occurs in the verses that regulate the ablution for the prayer (verses 4:43 and 5:6). Trans.
- 2. This view is with regard to a man who divorces his wife three times. (This could be done through the expedience of pronouncing the divorce phrase three times.) He may not marry her again except if she had, in the meantime, married and divorced another man. Hence the practice of arranging for the woman to marry a slave, who would later be made to divorce her. The full Qur'anic injunction is as follows: "And if he has divorced her [the third time], then she is not lawful to him thereafter until she has wedded another husband [besides her first husband]." Trans
- 3. The meaning of this verse–as well as the legal point that the Imam makes–is that this has to be a permanent marriage that can be terminated only with a divorce, not a temporary marriage that ends at the agreed time.–Trans
- 4. A mursal tradition is one that has a continuous chain of transmitters, but lacks the original narrator. Trans.

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