

## Chapter 2: Understanding and Interpreting the Qur'an

### The main problem

In the previous chapter we arrived at the conclusion that the Qur'an is a book of divine guidance and all of us are duty-bound to believe it. We have to manage our lives and society according to its instructions so as to be felicitous in this world and the hereafter. Now I would like to pose this question:

Notwithstanding the existence of the Qur'an, why do we still suffer from problems, especially cultural problems?

We will reply that it is because we do not act upon the salvation-giving commandments of the Qur'an as we ought to. This reply can be considered correct but it seems that the more fundamental question is: Why do we not act upon them as we ought to? In reality, what are the factors that contribute in the lesser attention given to the presence of the Qur'an in society and the gradual separation of people from the Qur'an, religious culture and divine values?

Since the subject of discussion is the Qur'an, according to *Nahj al-Balaghah*, we should ask: How does Hadhrat 'Ali ('a) analyse the main problem of our society and what solution does he suggest? Before replying through a statement of Hadhrat 'Ali ('a), I would like to embark on the main subject after a few preliminary remarks.

Faith in God and submission to the divine orders are among the most fundamental conditions of guidance and benefit from the instructions of the Holy Qur'an. Abrahamic faith and submission are necessary for one to be safe from the snares of Satan. The pebbles in Mash'ar al-Ma'rifah<sup>1</sup> must be collected with which to pelt [*ramy*] the devil of the commanding self or carnal soul [*nafs al-'ammarah*] when referring to the Holy Qur'an.

One must resist one's carnal desires, give preference to the word of God over them, and have no preconceived notions, in order to avoid committing errors while referring to the divine verses and

understanding the Holy Qur'an.

It is not true that whoever approaches the Qur'an with whatever intentions and by whatever means can rightly benefit from it. Simply put it, if we have truly accepted the servitude to God, we have to totally submit to Him, resign to His will and decree and sincerely believe that He knows better than His servants what is good for them and that He bids or forbids whatever is good or bad for them. It is only with such faith and conviction that people can correctly understand this divine book and benefit from its enlivening instructions.

Therefore, the first and foremost condition of benefiting from the divine guidance is to have the spirit of submission and avoid any form of prejudgment and self-centeredness. In the prescription that he writes for a patient, an expert physician expects him to take the prescribed medicine and foods and prohibit the intake of medicine or foods that prevent or delay his recovery.

Yet, are all prescriptions of a doctor consistent with the likes and inclinations of a patient? Possibly, a patient may enthusiastically take prescribed medicines and avoid some foods prohibited by the doctor. But in most cases, the inclinations of the patient are inconsistent with the prescriptions of the doctor. Sometimes, a patient wants to eat pickles but for the doctor, doing so is like taking deadly poison.

In these cases, it is possible that because of his strong inclination to these foods, the patient would doubt the diagnosis of the doctor and make personal desire a justification for consuming them.

Of course, regarding physical illnesses, on account of a strong desire to recover, man is not willing to violate the doctor's prescriptions. In most cases, he tries to prefer them over his personal inclinations and faithfully abide by the prescriptions of the attending physician. Concerning spiritual maladies, however, many people take their carnal inclinations as the criterion for judgment and engage in interpreting religion and divine laws on the basis of false, preconceived notions and improper desires.

Obviously, with such a mentality it is impossible to correctly understand the Qur'an and religion even if we assume that a person really wants to correctly understand it and has no intention at all to deceive others. The mere fact that he wants to understand the Qur'an and religion does not totally hinder the effects of his prejudgment, tainted notions and carnal inclinations from erroneously interpreting and understanding Qur'anic verses and traditions.

Of course, the case of individuals who are aware and consciously distort religious laws and decrees to deceive the people and render a blow to the religious culture of society in the name of different interpretations is a different story which we will deal at its appropriate time. We will briefly examine the causes and motives of this anti-religious idea from the perspective of *Nahj al-Balaghah*. Now, we will try to find the proper way of referring to the Qur'an and understanding its laws and injunctions from the statements of Hadhrat 'Ali ('a).

## The advice of ‘Ali (‘a) in dealing with the Qur’an

After the luminous statement in which he gave the news of the Day of Resurrection, the pleasure of the followers of the Qur’an on their actions and past record and the affliction of the violators of the Qur’an on that day, Imam ‘Ali (‘a) advises the people, thus: “You should be among the institutors of the Qur’an and its followers. Make it your guide towards your Lord. Seek its advice for yourselves.”<sup>2</sup>

That is to say, “Know God through His Word. Know the attributes of the Lord through the Qur’an. The Qur’an is a guide that will lead you to God.

You have to consult this divine guide so as to know its messenger and have faith in God who reveals the Qur’an. You human beings are in need of the One who is benevolent and compassionate to you so as to advise and sympathize with you in times of necessity. Take the Qur’an as your adviser and follow its sympathetic pieces of advice, for the Qur’an will never betray you but guide you in the best possible manner towards the straight path.”

Hadhrat ‘Ali (‘a) advises Muslims and those who are looking for felicity in this world and the hereafter to take the Qur’an as their guide and pay heed to its sincere admonitions, for

إِنَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ يَهْدِي لِلَّتِي هِيَ أَقْوَمُ وَيُبَشِّرُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ الَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ الصَّالِحَاتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ أَجْرًا كَبِيرًا

***“Indeed this Qur’an guides to what is most upright, and gives the good news to the faithful who do righteous deeds that there is a great reward for them.”<sup>3</sup>***

The point which is emphasized is the necessity for firm belief in the content of this noble verse, for once such faith in the Qur’an does not exist in man and he does not totally submit himself to God and empty himself of prejudgments and carnal desires, it is possible for him to succumb to satanic temptations and go astray. Once he consults the Qur’an, he unconsciously looks for verses that seemingly concord with his carnal desires.

Obviously, the injunctions and decrees of the Qur’an are not harmonious with the carnal desires and bestial inclinations of man. Thus, whenever the Qur’an states something against his personal inclinations, he is displeased and whenever Qur’anic verses are consistent with his carnal inclinations, he accepts them with open arms.

Of course, all these reactions are expressed secretly in his heart but their effects are manifested through his actions and behavior. As such, reason demands that before consulting the Qur’an, man empties his mind of any form of self-centeredness so that he can enter the school of the Qur’an with a spirit of God-centeredness. It is in this manner, observing the etiquettes sincerely, that man acquires divine gnosis.

## Speculative interpretation [tafsir bi 'r-ra'y]

Obviously, to do the above is not an easy task. In fact, for those who do not have a strong spirit of servitude to God it is even more difficult. For this reason, it is called greater *jihad* [*jihad al-akbar*].

It seems that the psychological and mental ground of speculative interpretation [*tafsir bi'r-ra'y*] is that man cannot abandon his carnal desires and inclinations. Satan further exploits this condition and directs the mind and thinking of such a person towards an erroneous and misleading interpretation of the Qur'an and religion.

If the person has a good social standing, the temptation of Satan, the sworn enemy of mankind, is multiplied because he knows that by misguiding such a person, he would possibly misguide a group of people who listens to that person. We often find individuals issue religious edicts without consulting the Qur'an and, without the least required intellectual and academic merit and qualification, express their personal opinion and say that the Qur'an also affirms it.

Then they justify it with short verses and their ambiguous outward meanings. Obviously, such a psychological background with preconceived notions does not guarantee an accurate understanding of the Qur'an but it also leads to misunderstanding and deviation from the truth.

In the religious parlance, this type of understanding and interpretation of the Qur'an is described as "*speculative interpretation*" [*tafsir bi'r-ra'y*] and regarded as the worst kind of approach to the Qur'an, in particular, and religion, in general. The Qur'an considers this kind of approach to religion and divine verses as an act of mockery and categorically denounces it:

وَلَا تَتَّخِذُوا آيَاتِ اللَّهِ هُزُوعًا وَادْكُرُوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ وَمَا أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكُمْ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَالْحِكْمَةِ بِعَظْمِ اللَّهِ بِهٍ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ  
وَاعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

***“Do not take the signs of Allah in derision, and remember Allah’s blessings upon you, and what He has sent down to you of the Book and wisdom, to advise you therewith. Be wary of Allah, and know that Allah has knowledge of all things.”<sup>4</sup>***

As mentioned earlier, the ones who benefit from the guidance of the Qur'an are those who believe and have faith in it. Those who want to coin religious or Qur'anic justification for their personal inclinations and interpret the Word of God according to their personal opinion have actually no faith in God. It is proper here to pay attention to some pertinent traditions:

قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ (ص): قَالَ اللَّهُ جَلَّ جَلَالُهُ: مَا آمَنَ بِي مَنْ فَسَّرَ بِرَأْيِهِ كَلَامِي

The Messenger of Allah (S) said:

“Allah, may He be glorified, said: ‘He who interprets My Word according to his opinion has indeed no faith in Me’.”[5](#)

Meanwhile, the Apostle (S) is also reported to have said:

مَنْ فَسَّرَ الْقُرْآنَ بِرَأْيِهِ فَقَدْ افْتَرَىٰ عَلَى اللَّهِ الْكُذْبَ.

“He who interprets the Qur’an according to his opinion has attributed a lie to Allah.”[6](#)

Thus, one who intends to interpret Qur’anic verses in his favor and present it as the interpretation of the Qur’an or the Word of God, has actually set his opinion as the criterion, and attributes it to God, the Exalted. This approach to the Qur’an and its interpretation is abominable and dangerous because it misguides, and those who commit such a sin shall be afflicted with the severest of punishments on the Day of Judgment. In this regard, the Apostle (S) has also said:

مَنْ فَسَّرَ الْقُرْآنَ بِرَأْيِهِ فَلْيَتَّبِعُوا مَقْعَدَهُ مِنَ النَّارِ.

“The abode of the one who interprets the Qur’an according to his opinion shall be in the Fire.”[7](#)

Therefore, in order to be safe from the gravest chastisement one should avoid impugning God, the Exalted, and keep away from falling into the pitfall of deviation, abandon carnal desires, shun egoism, have faith in the Sacred Essence, who is pure and good and does not wish anything but good for mankind, be God-oriented, and submit himself to Him.

## **The instruction of ‘Ali (‘a) to avoid speculative interpretation**

As mentioned earlier, man has desires and notions which are sometimes, nay in most cases, inconsistent with the Qur’anic outlook. In accordance with his human nature, he also wants the Qur’an to affirm his views and desires.

Sometimes, it is even possible that those notions unconsciously affect his understanding and interpretation of the Qur’an. Satan is busy looking for an opportunity to mislead a group of people from the path of truth by deceiving intellectuals who claim to be religious scholars. Hence, it is worthy to pay due attention to this part of the statement of Hadhrat ‘Ali (‘a).

In a bid to be immune from erroneous understanding and avoid possible deviation, Imam ‘Ali (‘a) said:

وَاتَّبِعُوا عَلَيْهِ آرَاءَكُمْ.

“Do not trust your views against it (the Qur’an).”<sup>8</sup>

That is to say, “When you engage in understanding and interpreting the Qur’an, find fault with your prejudgments, preconceived notions, inclinations, and views vis-à-vis the Qur’an and set aside your personal opinion and carnal desires.” Imam ‘Ali (‘a) said,

“Regard your desires in the matter of the Qur’an as deceitful.”<sup>9</sup>

It is said that the abovementioned statement indicates the need for utmost care, trustworthiness and God-woriness [*taqwa*] in understanding and interpreting the Holy Qur’an, for the Imam (‘a) said that one should approach the Qur’an and embark on understanding and interpreting it with the assumption that he knows nothing and whatever it states is the truth:

وَاسْتَعِشُوا فِيهِ أَهْوَاءَكُمْ.

“Regard your desires in the matter of the Qur’an as deceitful.”<sup>10</sup>

That is to say, “Consider your desires as wrong and improper so that you can benefit much from the Qur’an. Otherwise, you will always be on the verge of error and deviation.”

Therefore, the kernel of religion which is nothing but submission to God demands that man completely obeys God, the Exalted, and treats as erroneous his personal opinion with respect to God’s decrees and injunctions in the Holy Qur’an. Once such a spirit dominates, it is obvious that he will grasp the divine ordinances, commandments and teachings of the Qur’an better, and once he totally surrenders to God, heartily accepts them.

## **Two perspectives on the Qur’an and religious teachings**

There are two different perspectives on dealing with the Holy Qur’an and religious teachings:

1. Perspective based on God-centeredness and the spirit of submission and servitude to Him, and
2. Perspective which regards the carnal desires of man as the essence of creation and tries to interpret and understand religious texts and teachings of the Qur’an on that basis—commonly known today as “humanism”; that is, man-centeredness vis-à-vis God-centeredness.

It seems that the abovementioned classification is beyond the previous subjects and discussions, for it is now assumed that there are two possible ways of understanding the Qur’an. One is anchored in the spirit of submission and servitude to God and the other is probably an effect of the carnal desires.

Accordingly, in order to avoid speculative interpretation in understanding and interpreting the Qur’an and understand it accurately, we explained the pertinent advice of Hadhrat ‘Ali (‘a) on the necessity of

shunning prejudgment and purging the mind of carnal desires.

In this perspective, we considered both groups of addressees of Imam ‘Ali (‘a) as Muslims. In a bid to avoid deviation in religion and fall into the abyss of *tafsir bi’r-ra’y*, the observance of piety and keeping aloof from carnal desire and prejudgment is indispensable. As we delve deeper into the issue, we find out the marvels of Imam ‘Ali’s (‘a) words in classifying human beings on their degree of servitude to God into two main groups, and be more acquainted with his psychological knowledge of the human psyche in relation to religion and divine commandments.

By describing the characteristics of each group, he (‘a) presents the two groups as follows:

1. One group consists of those who have completely acknowledged their servitude to God and are determined to combat their carnal desires and give precedence to the will and pleasure of God over their whims and caprice. Naturally, such individuals who heartily acknowledge this heavenly book, i.e. the Qur’an, sincerely accept its injunctions and teachings and take it as their guide in practice and strive to observe its rites.

In describing this group, Hadhrat ‘Ali (‘a) said:

عِبَادَ اللَّهِ، إِنَّ مِنْ أَحَبِّ عِبَادِ اللَّهِ إِلَيْهِ عَبْدًا أَعَانَهُ اللَّهُ عَلَى نَفْسِهِ.

“Indeed, the most beloved of Allah is he whom Allah has given power (to act) against his passions.”<sup>11</sup>

Then, Imam ‘Ali (‘a) stated the status of the Qur’an among these people:

فَدَأْمَكَنَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْ زَمَامِهِ، فَهُوَ قَائِدُهُ وَإِمَامُهُ، يَحُلُّ حَيْثُ حَلَّ ثَقْلُهُ، وَيَنْزِلُ حَيْثُ كَانَ مَنْزِلُهُ.

“There is no good which he has not aimed at or any likely place (of virtue) of the Qur’an. Therefore the Qur’an is his guide and leader. He gets down when the Qur’an puts down his weight and he settles where the Qur’an settles him down.”<sup>12</sup>

This group has accepted the Qur’an and the truths of religion as a set of objective realities and has faith in them. It regards religious ordinances and injunctions of the Holy Qur’an as containing objective realities and observes them as directly related to his salvation and their violation as the cause of perdition in this world and the hereafter.

Since these individuals have no opinion or view of their own, they believe in religion, heavenly scriptures, divine ordinances and teachings; have faith in the causative relationship between them and the welfare of mankind, strive hard to accurately understand the Qur’an to know exactly what it enjoins; and then, follow it.

2. Opposed to the first group, there are people who think that the Qur'an, or any other religious text or scripture for that matter depends on what individuals think and it does not speak about absolute and specific subject matters.

The Qur'an or any religious text is devoid of meaning and content and it has no innate purpose. Every person has his own ideas which stem from his educational, family, social and other backgrounds. Once he approaches the Qur'an, he deduces certain points based on his personal ideas, while the Qur'an does not actually express those points.

In fact, it is his understanding which is discussed under the guise of the Qur'an. Obviously, given such perspective and outlook, religion, the Qur'an and its verses and injunctions are treated as words and frameworks devoid of any content and it is the ideas of man that give meaning and concept to these words.

According to the abovementioned notion, it is claimed that the Qur'an or any religious text has nothing to speak of. Rather, every person understands something from the Qur'an or any religious text according to his own mindset. Obviously, this kind of outlook is actually a mockery of religion and the religious.

## **Religious pluralism or denial of religion in the garb of “different interpretations”**

It is clear that what is presented today in our society as “different interpretations of religion” emanates from the second group. Although the abovementioned term is advanced by so-called Muslim intellectuals, the essence of the notion of “different interpretations of religion” must be sought in humanism or man-centeredness.

As stated before, the said notion regards the religious accounts, ordinances and injunctions of heavenly scriptures as meaningless, and it holds that the Qur'an or any religious text is silent and lacks any meaning and concept; in fact, it is we humans, having our own preconceptions, who attribute our understanding and interpretation to religion and the Qur'an. Accordingly, the Qur'an has no message of its own and does not speak of any truth.

With the purpose of clarifying the nature of this thought and understanding the argument of its proponents on the “silence of religion” and the possibility of different interpretations, citing an example might prove useful.

Perhaps, everybody is more or less familiar with the *Divan* [collection of poetry] of Hafiz<sup>13</sup> and the *ghazals*<sup>14</sup> and other poems of this great poet and prominent mystic. The different readings of the *divan* of Hafiz<sup>13</sup> and the poems of this great poet mean that the composer of these poems has not meant anything in the words and expressions used in poetry.

He has only put meaningless words and expressions together in a rhythmical form and arranged them as empty frameworks but of course with a very elegant and attractive rhythm. That is, while having no meaning, purpose and intention in mind, the poet has recited them.

In accordance with the notion of different readings, it is said that the *ghazals* and other poems of Hafiz are devoid of any meaning. By consulting the book for a specific purpose and mindset, everyone opens the book of Hafiz and interprets the first poem in a page or a *ghazal* in a certain way. For example, one who has a patient and wishes for his recovery consults the book and understands from a *ghazal* that his patient will not get well.

Another person who has a debt understands from the same *ghazal* that he will soon pay it. A third person who hopes for the return home of his loved one who is on a journey receives from it glad tidings of the return of his beloved. In general, everyone understands something from these words according to his mindset. In reality, it is the individuals who give the book of Hafiz the power of speech.

Everyone puts his own words in the mouth of Hafiz and all interpretations, justifications and perceptions are considered correct because these understandings are those of individuals, while the expressions, words, *ghazals*, and other poems are assumed meaningless.

This notion is exactly the same as the “different interpretations of religion,” which considers the Qur’an or any religious text meaningless and devoid of any message or significance. The proponents of this idea assume that the Qur’an does not state what to do or not to do, and what is true and correct or what is false and wrong. Rather, it is individuals who interpret truth and falsehood from the Qur’an, according to their own mindsets. Since these things originate from the minds of individuals, all of them can be considered correct.

In fact, to judge them as correct or otherwise is meaningless because all different interpretations of a verse, though contradictory to one another, are considered correct. A person understands from a *ghazal* of Hafiz that his patient will get well. Another person learns from it that his loved one who is traveling will return soon. A third person becomes hopeless and expects the death of his patient.

The proponents of the notion of “different interpretations of religion” claim that the Qur’an or any religious text is also like that. They believe that individuals are not supposed to accuse one another of misunderstanding the Qur’an because understanding it does not require any expertise since the Qur’an or any religious text has no message of its own for it to be understood.

The fact of the matter is that “understanding” is within the realm of man. In our opinion, the promotion of this idea is meant to attain certain political goals but it is outwardly advanced and promoted as a religious epistemological theory and called “new interpretation of religion,” “straight paths,” or the like.

Religious pluralism which is presented in the framework of “different interpretations of religion” is not very logically or rationally substantiated. Once a rational person examines the roots of this idea and its

effects, he will undoubtedly confirm its falsity and futility. On the other hand, given the destructive impacts of pluralist thought in religious society, it cannot easily be ignored.

It seems that coupled with thousands of years of experience, one of the most effective snares which Satan—this sworn enemy of mankind—has used since the creation of Hadhrat Adam (Adam) (‘a) to deceive the worshippers of God and monotheists is to advance the notion of “different interpretations of religion”.

Inspired by this satanic thinking, so-called intellectuals rush to the help of Satan and exert all efforts to assist him in this regard. They have placed their talents and powers of oral and written expressions at the disposal of Satan and set themselves as instruments to misguide people.

We have to think as much as possible about the true meaning of “different interpretations of religion” or “straight paths” and to reflect on the destructive effects and repercussions of this atheistic thought so that we can find out the goals of the founders and proponents of this satanic snare and realize the intensity of their movement.

In any case, once we compare this tendency with that of the first group, [we will find out that] the spirit of the first tendency is God-centeredness or servitude and submission to God, the Exalted, and the spirit of the second tendency is man-centeredness or keeping away from God and His commandments.

In the first tendency, the efforts are generally exerted for man to accept his servitude to God, the Exalted, while in the second tendency the efforts are exerted for man to deny his servitude to God and indulge in bestial inclinations and passions. This tendency sets human inclinations and desires as the essence and tries to interpret and justify religion or the Qur’an according to them.

Perhaps, one of the reasons behind the emphasis of the Qur’an on its descriptions such as

تِلْكَ آيَاتُ الْكِتَابِ وَقُرْآنٍ مُّبِينٍ

***“These are the signs of the Book and a manifest Qur’an,”*** [15](#)

بِلِسَانٍ عَرَبِيٍّ مُّبِينٍ

***“In a clear Arabic language,”*** [16](#)

تِلْكَ آيَاتُ الْقُرْآنِ وَكِتَابٍ مُّبِينٍ

***“These are the signs of the Qur’an and a manifest Book,”***<sup>17</sup> and

قَدْ جَاءَكُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ نُورٌ وَكِتَابٌ مُبِينٌ

***“Certainly there has come to you a light from Allah and a manifest Book,”***<sup>18</sup>

which highlight the clarity, lucidity and expressiveness of the Qur’an is exactly to prevent deviant thoughts like “different interpretations of religion” and refute any allegation of ambiguity and vagueness in the meaning and purport of the Qur’an.

Thus, the Qur’an is the book of guidance in which God, the Exalted, has stated all the truths necessary for the happiness of man in this world and the hereafter. By reflecting on the Qur’an, Muslims are duty-bound to know their individual and social duties and guarantee their salvation by following it. Meanwhile, the question on who is the competent person to interpret the Qur’an and religious teachings is a subject which we shall now deal with.

## **The necessity of acquiring competence in understanding and interpreting the Qur’an**

It is evident that not everyone can understand and interpret the Qur’an just as not everyone can understand subtle scientific facts in any field or domain. To understand complex mathematical equations or subtleties of other sciences is within the competence of the experts only, and the non-experts are not only incapable of expressing views in this regard but their views are devoid of any value whatsoever.

Concerning the Qur’an, the views of those who are not familiar with the religious sciences and teachings are devoid of any value and importance. It is true that the Qur’an has been revealed in a clear and eloquent language so that the people can understand and put it into practice, but it does not mean that the profundity of its knowledge [*ma’arif*] can uniformly be grasped by one and all.

What can be understood by the common people from the Qur’an is that level of meaning which the Qur’an itself mentions to the effect: “We revealed the Qur’an in plain language.” That is, the Qur’an has been revealed in such a manner that anyone who knows Arabic and possesses the spirit of servitude to God can understand it and benefit from it according to his own intellectual level. However, to fathom the meanings and knowledge [*ma’arif*] of the Qur’an a great deal of reflection and thinking is needed. In this regard, the Qur’an says:

إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

***“Indeed We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur’an so that you may apply reason.”***<sup>19</sup>

إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

***“We have made it an Arabic Qur’an so that you may apply reason.”<sup>20</sup>***

In general, the verses that invite mankind to reflect and apply reason regarding the Qur’an and its teachings tell us that we should not only depend on the outward meanings of the Qur’an. Instead, by relying upon reflection, reason and the knowledge of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a), we have to explore the profundity and subtleties of the Qur’an and benefit from this treasure of divine knowledge more than ever.

Therefore, to understand the Qur’an and interpret its sublime knowledge [*ma‘arif*] is only within the competence of the experts who are acquainted with the knowledge of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a). A neophyte without any knowledge of religion and the principles and rules governing the exegesis [*tafsir*] of the Qur’an, has no right to express a view or say anything under the name of a “new interpretation of religion and its laws and teachings”.

## **Different degrees of meaning and understanding of Qur’anic concepts**

Many traditions [*ahadith*] can be quoted as pointing towards the inner [*batin*] and outer [*ʿahir*] aspects of Qur’anic knowledge [*ma‘arif*], and not everyone is capable of discerning its depth. As stated before, the Qur’an is a deep and boundless ocean.

Depending on one’s capability and skill in diving, anyone can go searching for that oceanic jewel of knowledge, go further beyond the outward aspects [*ʿawahir*], fathom its profound knowledge, and infer various facts of diverse meanings from a single verse without the minutest contradiction. This is in itself one of the miracles [*mu‘jizat*] of the Qur’an.

For instance, the Qur’an thus states:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ أَنْتُمُ الْفُقَرَاءُ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ هُوَ الْغَنِيُّ الْحَمِيدُ

***“O mankind! You are the ones who stand in need of Allah, and Allah is He who is the All-sufficient, the All-laudable.”<sup>21</sup>***

What common people understand from this verse as it outwardly indicates is that we are in need of God, the Exalted, who is self-sufficient and worthy of praise. By the word *faqr* [poverty], what come to the minds of common people are human needs for subsistence such as food, clothing and others.

By creating their causes and effects, God, the Exalted, provides means for the subsistence, growth and

evolution of man. At this level of understanding which is the “outward level,” the Qur’an is clear and evident and all those who know its language can understand it well. It does not mean, however, that another meaning which is deeper than this outward meaning cannot be inferred from it and the abovementioned verse does not point to any fact more profound than what the common people understand.

The more a person is acquainted with the different subjects of scholastic theology [*ilm al-kalam*] and literary nuances of the Arabic language, the more he reflects and ponders on each verse, and finds subtler and more profound meanings than the obvious meanings of the Qur’an.

If we try to reflect a bit deeper on this verse, we will realize that our poverty and need for God, the Exalted, is beyond the need for food, clothing, health, and material things. We are in absolute poverty while God is All-sufficient. We are essentially poor [*faqir bi’dh-dhat*] while God is Self-sufficient in essence [*ghani bi’dh-dhat*]. Literally, “poor” refers to a person whose pillars of support are broken and he is incapable of standing.

“Man is poor” means that even if all material things are provided for him, his existence is defective and dependent. The essence of our existence is in need of God. It is God, the Exalted, who has created us. By creating the causes and effects of existence, it is He who has provided the ground for man’s subsistence, growth and evolution. By the nature and essence of our being, we are poor and needy while God is All-sufficient in essence.

It is evident that the second perspective is deeper than the first one. The first and second meanings are considered “outer” and “inner” respectively. And even more profound meaning than the second one is for us to say that human beings are not only poor and needy by the nature of their existence but by the nature of the very “need” itself. Their need for existence is their connection with God, the Exalted. Of course, to understand the truth of the third meaning is beyond the capability of common people.

It must be noted that all three interpretations of this verse run parallel, all three are correct and rightful, none of them contradicts the other. In terms of depth, however, they are not of the same level. It is not correct to say that all degrees of the meanings of the Qur’an are universally understandable and that all people have the power and capability to understand all levels and degrees of the Qur’an.

It is necessary to emphasize and point out that after the Apostle (S), only the Imams (‘a), through divine inspiration, possess the knowledge and sciences of the Qur’an and are cognizant of the inner aspects of this great heavenly book. In this regard, we shall partially quote below a relevant tradition:

عَنْ أَبِي جَعْفَرٍ (ع) فَقَالَ يَا جَابِرُ! إِنَّ لِلْقُرْآنِ بَطْنًا وَلِلْبَطْنِ بَطْنٌ وَلَهُ ظَهْرٌ وَلِلظَّهْرِ ظَهْرٌ يَا جَابِرُ! وَلَيْسَ شَيْءٌ أَبْعَدُ مِنْ عُقُولِ الرِّجَالِ مِنْ تَفْسِيرِ الْقُرْآنِ إِنَّ الْآيَةَ يَكُونُ أَوْلَهَا فِي شَيْءٍ وَآخِرُهَا فِي شَيْءٍ وَهُوَ كَلَامٌ مُتَّصِلٌ يَنْصَرَفُ عَلَى وُجُوهِ

Abu Ja’far (Imam Muhammad al-Baqir) (‘a) said: “O Jabir! The Qur’an has an interior [*batin*] and this

interior is within an interior. It also has an exterior [أَهِير] and this exterior is within an exterior. O Jabir! Also know that the intellects of men are incapable of interpreting the Qur'an. Verily, the first part of a verse may deal with a thing while its latter part may deal with another thing. It consists of words connected together with the capacity of having various meanings (though without being contradictory to one another).”<sup>22</sup>

What is emphasized here is that understanding the inner meanings and subtleties of the Qur'an is not within the competence of everybody. Of course, it does not mean that the Qur'an has been revealed only for the Imams ('a) and scholars, and others are incapable of understanding even the outward meanings of the Qur'an.

In fact, the outward meanings of the Qur'an can be beneficial to everyone, depending on the talent and the level of understanding and discernment, provided that he sets aside his prejudgment as well as carnal desires and inclinations, and avoids speculative interpretation. In connection with understanding the Qur'an, one has to pay special attention to certain points which we shall deal with under the following heading.

## Confining the Apostle (S) and infallible Imams' ('a) interpretation of the Qur'an to the exposition of laws

As stated and proved in the pertinent section, one of the functions of the Apostle (S) apart from receiving and conveying the revelation is to explain it and elucidate the divine laws and decrees. The Holy Qur'an has been revealed to the Apostle (S) in the form of a set of general laws and ordinances whose details have not been explained elaborately except in a few cases.

Their elaborate explanations have been assigned to the Apostle (S) and thereafter the infallible Imams ('a). For example, the Qur'an enjoins the ritual prayer [*salat*] in general terms and calls on the Muslims to establish prayers, but the procedure of its performance—the number of *raka'at* [cycles or units], manner of recitation, and its conditions and details—have not been mentioned in the Qur'an. Elaborate exposition of these general laws and the like has been assigned to the Apostle (S).

Thus, the interpretation and elucidation of the divine laws has been assigned to the Apostle (S) and it is one of his prophetic functions. The Qur'an also pays attention to the function of explaining the revelation and considers it as one of the duties of the Apostle (S):

وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الذِّكْرَ لِتُبَيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ مَا نُزِّلَ إِلَيْهِمْ

***“We have sent down the reminder to you so that you may clarify for the people that which has been sent down to them.”***<sup>23</sup>

It is likely that the purport of “teaching” in verses like *ayah* 164 of *Surah Al ‘Imran* in which “teaching” is mentioned along with “recitation” also bespeaks of the position and function of the Apostle (S) in elucidating and interpreting Qur’anic revelations.

In reality, while conveying the revelation, the Apostle (S) had been performing two functions, viz. reciting the revealed words to the people, and elucidating and interpreting its meaning and purport to acquaint them with the laws and teachings of the Qur’an. In this regard, the Qur’an states:

لَقَدْ مَنَّ اللَّهُ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ إِذْ بَعَثَ فِيهِمْ رَسُولًا مِّنْ أَنفُسِهِمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَإِن كَانُوا مِن قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ

**“Allah certainly favored the faithful when He raised up among them an apostle from among themselves to recite to them His signs and to purify them, and to teach them the Book and wisdom, and earlier they had indeed been in manifest error.”<sup>24</sup>**

In this and similar verses, the first duty has been mentioned with the phrase “to recite” [*yatlu*] and in mentioning the second duty the expression “to teach” [*ta’lim*] has been used.

In conclusion, elucidation of the revelation and elaborate explanation of the divine laws and exegesis of the Holy Qur’an in the above sense is a function which is only within the competence of the Apostle (S) and the infallible Imams (‘a), for they are the only ones blessed with divine knowledge and wisdom by God.

## **Acquiring the knowledge provided by the Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) as a prerequisite in understanding and interpreting the Qur’an**

The duty of the exegetes [*mufassirin*] becomes very clear. As pointed out before, elucidation of the revelation, elaborate explanation of the laws and interpretation of the Qur’anic verses are essentially assigned to and within the competence of the Apostle (S) who, during his blessed life, acquainted the people whenever it was possible with the teachings of the Qur’an.

Today, the exegetes are duty-bound to refer to the authentic traditions [*ahadith*] and narrations [*riwayat*] reported from the Apostle (S) in this regard. Based on these traditions, they have to closely examine and scrutinize the relevant verses and organize their views and opinions within the framework of the Apostle’s (S) expositions and explanations.

At the points where the Prophet (S) did not have the opportunity to expound the Greater One of the Two Weighty Things [*thiq al-akbar*] i.e. the firm Qur’an, they have to resort to the Great One of the Two Weighty Things [*thiq al-kabir*], viz. the *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a) and the infallible Imams (‘a). In this regard, the religious science experts and scholars are equally obliged to take the authentic traditions and narrations

as their basis and proof in understanding the Holy Qur'an and base the exegesis or interpretation of the Qur'an on these traditions.

Therefore, the first criterion for correct understanding of the Qur'an and religious teachings is the elucidation or explanation transmitted from the Apostle (S) and the infallible Imams ('a) to us. Hence, the first and foremost duty of an exegete [*mufassir*] is to understand and expound the exegesis which has been reported from the Apostle (S) and the Imams ('a), for only in the light of the knowledge of the *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a) can one understand the sciences of the Qur'an.

## Interpreting the Qur'an by means of the Qur'an

The third point which is extremely important and expedient to pay attention to in understanding correctly the revealed words is the issue of interpreting the Qur'an by means of itself and paying attention to the existing relationship between verses.

It is true that the verses of the Qur'an are apparently separate from one another, and every verse or group of verses seemingly speaks about a specific subject, but correct understanding or proper interpretation is possible only when the verses of the Qur'an are taken into account in relation to one another. Many verses and points of this divine book interpret one another and give testimony to their veracity and truthfulness.

In this regard, Imam 'Ali ('a) says:

كِتَابُ اللَّهِ تُبْصِرُونَ بِهِ، وَتَنْطِقُونَ بِهِ، وَتَسْمَعُونَ بِهِ، وَيَنْطِقُ بَعْضُهُ بِبَعْضٍ، وَيَشْهَدُ بَعْضُهُ عَلَى بَعْضٍ، وَلَا يَخْتَلِفُ فِي اللَّهِ، وَلَا يُخَالِفُ بِصَاحِبِهِ عَنِ اللَّهِ.

“The Book of Allah is that through which you see, you speak and you hear. Its one part speaks for the other part, and one part testifies to the other. It does not create differences about Allah nor does it mislead its own follower from (the path of) Allah.”<sup>25</sup>

Among the cases of the interpretation of the Qur'an by means of itself, one may cite for example *ayah* 11 of *Surah al-Shawra* and *ayah* 10 of *Surah al-Fath*:

لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ

“Nothing is like Him, and He is the All-hearing, the All-seeing.”<sup>26</sup>

يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ

***“The hand of Allah is above their hands.”***<sup>27</sup>

“*Nothing is like Him*” is one of the precise verses [*muhkamat*] of the Qur’an and its meaning is clear and unambiguous. This verse states that nothing is like Him; that is, God, the Exalted, is the Unique Reality. The second verse states that “*the hand of Allah is above their hands*”. It is true that this verse has attributed a “hand” to God but the first verse negates this apparent meaning and in view of which we can understand that by “*yad*” it does not suggest its apparent meaning, i.e. “hand”.

It rather refers to its allegorical meaning such as “power” and the like. Thus, interpreting and expounding the verse “*The hand of Allah is above their hands*” without paying attention to the verse “*Nothing is like Him*” is outside the periphery of proper method of interpretation and because of this wrong interpretation, it may possibly lead to the presentation of an erroneous anthropomorphic representation of God.

As such, in interpreting the Qur’an we have to pay attention to the verses in relation to one another and understand their meaning through the Qur’an itself.

## **Observing the principles and rules of intellectual discourse in understanding the Qur’an**

The fourth point that must be noted in interpreting and correctly understanding the Qur’an is the observance of principles and rules of intellectual discourse. Especially when there is no available authentic tradition or clear explanation from the Apostle (S) or the infallible Imams (‘a), the necessity of observing the principles and rules of intellectual discourse is multiplied. It is at this stage that the role of the prominent men of religion, exegetes and those who have acquired the knowledge of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a), becomes clear.

They are the ones who in accordance with the principles of intellectual discourse identify the general [*‘am*] and specific [*khass*] injunctions of the Qur’an, specify the scope of meaning of each of them, know the abstract [*mutlaq*] and concrete [*muqayyad*] meanings, interpret verses by means of one another, determine the precedence of one verse over another, and pay attention to them in their exegetical pursuits.

## **The understanding of exegetes commensurates with their competence**

The other point which must be noted in this section is not confined to understanding the Qur’an and religious sciences. It is universally accepted that an individual’s intellectual capabilities, extent of efforts exerted and meticulousness in correctly understanding a subject decide the degree of his understanding. Let us elaborate:

In juristic discussions, one of the issues which are more or less affirmed by all jurists [*fuqaha*] and considered part of the duties of every follower [*muqallid*]<sup>28</sup> is the question of following [*taqlid*] the more knowledgeable or the most learned [*a'lam*]. Accordingly, it is said that expertise in jurisprudence [*fiqh*] and the deduction of laws from religious sources [*ijtihad*] has various levels.

Every *mukallaf* <sup>29</sup> is obliged to follow [*taqlid*] the most learned jurist [*faqih*], i.e. one who in matters of *ijtihad* has the superior understanding and talent and is the most knowledgeable in jurisprudence. Of course, the other *maraji' al-taqlid* [sources of emulation or religious authorities] who are not equal to the most learned in matters of *ijtihad* are also *fuqaha* and *mujtahidun* but they are on a lower level.

It must not remain unsaid that the religious edict [*fatwa*] of the *fuqaha* on the necessity of following the most learned also stems from the rational method. It is exactly like referring to an expert doctor who has many years of medical experience. To prefer him over a doctor who has recently acquired his license to practice medicine is the rational decision, and to do otherwise is condemned by all rational people.

Understanding and identifying the subtleties of the Qur'an is only within the competence of the experts who spent their lives understanding the Qur'an and religious sciences with the knowledge acquired from the *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a).

Keeping in view the different degrees of understanding and interpreting this heavenly book, it is evident that the more the abovementioned points and affairs are taken into account, the lesser will be the probability of committing mistakes while interpreting the divine verses, and easier to get closer to the correct understanding of this heavenly scripture.

## **The necessity of paying attention to the linguistic contexts**

The sixth point to which we would like to draw the attention of the readers is the necessity of paying attention to the linguistic and positional contexts and the occasion of the revelation of the verses. It is true that the Holy Qur'an has been revealed for all ages and generations and addressed to the people of all ages, but the context and occasion of revelation was clear for the first addressees and people of the period of revelation and there was no room for doubt and dispute on their meanings and interpretations.

Moreover, if there was any ambiguity surrounding a verse, the people's access to the Apostle (S) was not problematic. Today, however, the possibility of some contexts and occasions of revelations being concealed, the expediency or need for meticulousness in properly understanding the Qur'an becomes far more important.

On the other hand, information about the true and literal meanings of words used in the Holy Qur'an is one of the issues without which it is impossible to correctly understand and properly interpret the Qur'an. Negligence in the transformation of meanings, which sometimes happens in the course of time to a certain word, may possibly lead to error and misunderstanding.

For example, the meaning and concept of the word *taqiyyah* [dissimulation] is clear to all. In popular usage this word means that a person conceals his faith or religion and acts in such a manner that others are uninformed of his real faith or religion while the literal meaning of *taqiyyah* is piety and it has been used in the Qur'an and *Nahj al-Balaghah* in this sense. The word *taqiyyah* is not mentioned in the Qur'an but the word *taqah* which is synonymous with *taqiyyah* and *taqwa* [piety or God-wariness] is mentioned in the passage below:

اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ حَقَّ تَقَاتِهِ

***“Be wary of Allah with the wariness due to Him.”<sup>30</sup>***

## **The existence of literary beauties in the Holy Qur'an**

It is true that the Holy Qur'an, as it declares itself, has been revealed in a clear and expressive language, and depending on the level of understanding and talent, one can benefit from this heavenly book, but it is worthy of note that the Qur'an possesses the most eloquent and expressive literary and rhetorical beauties. It is evident that paying attention to the abovementioned points is also one of the basic conditions of correctly and properly benefiting from the Holy Qur'an.

Sometimes, in the Holy Qur'an a certain verse mentions a decree in a general and common sense, and in another verse the limitation of the said decree is clarified. Or, in a certain verse a decree is stated in an absolute sense and its condition or requisite can be inferred from another verse. Elaborating a point by means of an example or the use of allusion, metaphor, allegory, and the like is also one of methods employed in the Qur'an.

Since those who are addressed by the Qur'an are humans and the stated methods are considered among the beauties of human speech in expressing concepts and points, the Qur'an also uses the stated methods in the best possible manner while declaring its decrees and teachings. Therefore, the methods used in the Qur'an are the same methods used by the wise in expressing their intentions but with a difference.

The art of expression in the Qur'an cannot be compared in terms of degree, beauty and eloquence with its use by man. The reason for this is that the Qur'an is the Word of God, the Exalted, which has been revealed to the Apostle (S) in the most eloquent manner, and has taught the principles of eloquence and fluency to mankind. This book has invited the people to monotheism, guidance, perfection, and felicity in the most beautiful and eloquent manner.

In a single statement: neglect of any of the above-mentioned prerequisites will lead to a misunderstanding and incorrect interpretation of the heavenly book—the Holy Qur'an.

<sup>1</sup>. Mash'ar al-Ma'rifah [lit. consciousness of the divine gnosis], Mash'ar al-Haram [lit. sacred consciousness] or

Muzdalifah: the place where the Hajj pilgrims spend the night on their return from 'Arafah to pick up 70 pebbles to be pelted [ramy] at jamarat [places of the three stone slabs symbolizing Satan] in Mina. [Trans.]

[2.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 175.

[3.](#) Surah al-Isra' (or Bani Isra'il) 17:9.

[4.](#) Surah al-Baqarah 2:231.

[5.](#) Shaykh al-Saduq, Al-Tawhid, p. 68.

[6.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 36, p. 227.

[7.](#) 'Awali al-La'ali, vol. 4, p. 104.

[8.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 175.

[9.](#) Ibid.

[10.](#) Ibid.

[11.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 86.

[12.](#) Ibid.

[13.](#) Khwajah Shams al-Din Muhammad Hafiz Shirazi (ca. 1325–1391) was the fourteenth century Persian lyric bard and panegyrist, and commonly considered as the preeminent master of the ghazal form. [Trans.]

[14.](#) Ghazal is a lyric form of Persian poetry, with rhyme in the first two and in even numbered lines, and allowing various metric forms. With respect to content, it usually does not express the linear development of an idea, but rather its couplets express variations on an idea or mood. [Trans.]

[15.](#) Surah al-Hijr 15: 1.

[16.](#) Surah al-Shu'ara' 26:195.

[17.](#) Surah al-Naml 27: 1.

[18.](#) Surah al-Ma'idah 5: 15.

[19.](#) Surah Yusuf 12:2.

[20.](#) Surah al-Zukhruf 43:3.

[21.](#) Surah Fatir (or al-Mala'ikah) 35: 15.

[22.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 92, p. 91.

[23.](#) Surah al-Nahl 16:44.

[24.](#) Surah Al 'Imran 3: 164.

[25.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 133.

[26.](#) Surah al-Shawra 42: 11.

[27.](#) Surah al-Fath 48: 10.

[28.](#) Muqallid (lit. imitator, emulator or follower): the person who follows a certain marja' al-taqid [source of emulation or reference authority] in matters of religious jurisprudence. [Trans.]

[29.](#) Mukallaf (lit. charged with a duty): comopos mentis or adult person bound to observe the precepts of religion. [Trans.]

[30.](#) Surah Al 'Imran 3: 102.

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