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Issues in an Analytical Study of the Qur'an

Now we shall proceed to study the contents of the Qur'an from an analytic viewpoint. Of course, if we were to deal with every subject of the Qur'an separately, it would call for --as Rumi would say-- seventy tons of paper. So we will confine our discussion mainly to general and then a few particular issues.

The Qur'an has dealt with a vast range of subjects, and in this process, it is more concerned with certain subjects and less with others. The universe and its Creator are among the most recurring themes of the Qur'an. We must try to see how it treats this theme. Is its outlook philosophical or gnostic? Is its treatment similar to that of other religious books like the Bible and the Torah? Is it similar to that of the religious books of Hinduism? Does it deal with this problem in its own independent manner?

The other problem that is repeatedly treated by the Qur'an is the problem of the universe or the world of creation. We must examine the outlook of the Qur'an about the universe. Does it regard the universe and all creation to be an exercise in vanity and futility or does it regard it as being based on coherent truth?

Does it consider the state of affairs in the universe as being based upon a series of laws and principles, or does it regard it as a chaotic phenomenon in which nothing is the cause or condition of any other thing? Among the general issues dealt by the Qur'an is the problem of the human being. The Qur'anic outlook regarding the human being must be analyzed. Does the Qur'an possess an optimistic outlook of man? Does it speak of him in pessimistic and negative terms? Does the Qur'an consider man as a despicable creature, or does it acknowledge his nobility and dignity?

The other problem dealt with in the Qur'an is the problem of human society. We have to see if the Qur'an considers the society to be primary and the individual as secondary or whether it subordinates the society to the individual.

Are societies, according to the Qur'an, subject to laws governing their life and death, their rise and decline, or are these conditions applicable to individuals alone? In the same way, its conception of history also needs to be clarified. What is the Qur'anic view regarding history? What are the forces that control the dynamics of history? To what extent can an individual's influence affect the course of history

in the view of the Qur'an?

The Qur'an deals with numerous other issues. I shall enumerate some of them here. One of them is the point of view of the Qur'an about itself. The other issue is related to the Prophet (S) and its manner of introducing and addressing him. Another issue is its definition of a believer (mu'min) and his characteristics and so on.

Furthermore, each of these general issues possesses various branches and divisions. For example, when discussing mankind and its situation, it is natural to speak about morality. Or, when speaking about society, the problem of human relationships also unavoidably enters the discussion. The same is true of such notions as "enjoining good and forbidding evil," and the problem of social classes.

How does the Qur'an Introduce Itself?

For the purpose of analysing Qur'anic themes, it is better to start by examining the opinion of the Qur'an about itself and its manner of self-introduction. The first and foremost thing that the Qur'an pronounces about itself is that all of its words, phrases and sentences are the Word of God. It makes clear that the Prophet (S) was not its author; rather the Prophet only related whatever was revealed to him through the agency of the Ruh al-Qudus (Gabriel) with the permission of God.

The Qur'an describes its other function as the presentation of the Prophetic mission, which is aimed at guidance of humanity, by delivering it from darkness and leading it towards light:

كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ لِتُخْرِجَ النَّاسَ مِنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ

"A Book We have sent down to thee that thou mayest bring forth mankind from the darkness into the light..." (14: 1)

Without doubt the darkness of ignorance is one of the vices from which the Qur'an emancipates humanity and leads it towards the light of knowledge and wisdom. However, if merely ignorance were regarded as darkness, then the philosophers could have accomplished this job. But there exist other evils more dangerous than the vice of ignorance, and to subdue them is beyond the power of sheer knowledge.

Among them are the vices of worship of material benefits, egoism, enslavement to desires, and greed, which are considered to be personal and moral vices. Social vices like oppression and discrimination manifest the spiritual darkness of a society. In Arabic, the word *zulm* (injustice and oppression) is derived from the same root as *zulmah* (darkness), which shows that injustice is a form of social and spiritual darkness. To struggle against such forms of darkness is the responsibility and mission of the Qur'an and other heavenly books. Addressing Prophet Moses (A), the Qur'an says:

أَنْ أَخْرِجَ قَوْمَكَ مِنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ

“That thou mayest bring forth your people from the darkness into the light ... “ (14:5)

This darkness, this shadow, is the darkness of Pharaoh's oppression and injustice and that of his clique. The light is the light of justice and freedom.

The exegetists of the Qur'an emphasize the point that whenever the Qur'an mentions darkness, it always uses it in the plural form although it always uses light in its singular form. This means that the word, (darkness) includes all sorts of darkness, all of the evil ways that lead towards darkness, and that (light) signifies one single right path --the path of righteousness, whereas the ways of deviation and perversion are many. In Suurat al-Baqarah, the Qur'an says:

اللَّهُ وَلِيُّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا يُخْرِجُهُم مِّنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ ۚ وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَوْلِيَاوُهُمُ الطَّاغُوتُ يُخْرِجُونَهُم مِّنَ النُّورِ إِلَى الظُّلُمَاتِ

“God is the Protector of the believers; He brings them forth from the darkness into the light. And the unbelievers --their protectors are taghut, that bring them forth from the light into the darkness ...” (2:257)

The Qur'an determines its goal to be the breaking of the chains of ignorance, misguidance, moral and social corruption and destruction, or in other words, to dissipate all sorts of (darkness) and to guide humanity in the direction of justice, goodness and light.

The Language of the Qur'an

The other issue is that of gaining familiarity with the language of the Qur'an and the recitation of it. There are some people who think that the Qur'an is to be read merely for the purpose of obtaining spiritual reward (thawab) without need of understanding anything of its contents. They continuously recite the Qur'an, but if they are even once asked) “Do you understand the meaning of what you are reading?” they cannot answer. To recite the Qur'an is essential and good, being regarded as the first step necessary for comprehending its contents; and not merely as a means for gaining Divine reward.

The comprehension of the meaning of the Qur'an has certain peculiarities to which due attention must be paid. While other books are read for the purpose of acquiring the knowledge of novel ideas that merely involve reason and the rational faculties of the reader's mind, the Qur'an must be studied with the intention of educating oneself. The Qur'an itself clarifies this point:

كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ مُبَارَكٌ لِّيَدَّبَّرُوا آيَاتِهِ وَلِيَتَذَكَّرَ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

“A book We have sent down to thee, blessed, that men possessed of mind may ponder its signs and so remember.” (38:29)

One of the functions of the Qur'an is to instruct and to teach. For this purpose, the Qur'an addresses human reason and speaks in logical and demonstrative terms. There is also another language that the Qur'an makes use of. But this language is not used to appeal to the faculty of reason, but to the heart. This is the language of feeling. Whosoever wants to acquaint himself with the Qur'an, should be familiar with both of the languages and be able to make use of both of them simultaneously. It is a grave mistake to separate one from the other.

That which is termed here as the heart, is the great source of profound feeling that resides within all human beings. This is sometimes also called “the sense of being”, i.e. the feeling of relationship between human existence and the Absolute Being.

One who knows the language of the heart, when he addresses the human being in this language, can move the inner depths of his being. It is not merely the mind and the intellect alone which is affected, but his whole being, which is profoundly influenced. This sort of influence can perhaps be illustrated by the example of music. The various forms of music share the common quality which is stimulation of human feelings. Music appeals to the human soul and immerses it into a specific world of feeling.

The nature of feelings, excited by different kinds of music, of course, varies. Certain types of music may be associated with the passions of valour and bravery. In the past, on the battlefield, the effects of martial music were evident. Sometimes its effects were so strong that the frightened soldiers who would not dare come out of their bunkers, were made to march in fervour despite fierce attacks from enemy's ranks.

It is possible that certain other kinds of music may excite sensual feelings and invite the listener to succumb to sensual vices. The results of such music are noticeable in the moral waywardness of our own times. Perhaps no other thing could have so effectively broken down the walls of morality and chastity to the extent of this kind of music. Other kinds of instinctive feelings and passions, whether aroused by means of music or by some other means, can be controlled when addressed in the language that appeals to them.

One of the most sublime instincts and emotions present in all human beings is the urge for religion and the natural quest for God. It is in the same heavenly echoes that the Qur'an speaks to the Divine instincts of mankind. The Qur'an itself recommends that its verses be recited in fine and beautiful rhythms; for it is in those heavenly rhythms that it speaks to the Divine nature of man.

The Qur'an, describing itself, maintains that it speaks in two languages. Sometimes it introduces itself as the Book of meditation, logic and demonstration; at other times as the Book of feeling and love. In other words, it does not merely seek to nourish the intellect and thought, but also nurtures the human soul.

The Qur'an lays great emphasis on its own specific quality of music, a music which more than any other music, is effective in arousing the profound and sublime feelings of the human heart. The Qur'an directs the believers to devote a few hours of the night to reciting its verses, and to recite them during their ritual prayers when their attention is turned towards God. Addressing the Prophet, the Qur'an says:

يَا أَيُّهَا الْمُزْمَلُ () قُمْ اللَّيْلَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا () نِصْفَهُ أَوْ انْقُصْ مِنْهُ قَلِيلًا () أَوْ زِدْ عَلَيْهِ وَرَتِّلِ الْقُرْآنَ تَرْتِيلًا

“O thou enwrapped in thy robes, keep vigil the night, except a little (a half of it, or diminish a little, or add a little) and chant the Qur'an very distinctly.” (73: 1 –4)

It asks the Prophet (S) to recite the Qur'an while standing for the prayers. Tartil means to recite neither too hastily that words cannot be distinguished, nor too slowly that their connection be lost. It commands the Prophet (S) to recite its verses rhythmically, and at the same time to cogitate upon their meaning.

Again, in a later verse of the same surah, the Prophet is reminded that he needs enough sleep to effectively perform the daily chores of business or jihad in the path of God; nevertheless, he should not forget to seclude himself for worship.

It were the same rhythms of the Qur'an that became the singular source of spiritual joy and strength, and the means of producing inner purity and sincerity among Muslims. It was the same music of the Qur'an which, in a very short period of time, converted the barbarous tribes of the Arabian peninsula, into a steadfast nation of committed believers, who could grapple with the greatest powers of the age and overthrow them.

The Muslims did not merely view the Qur'an as a book of moral advice and instruction alone, but also, as a spiritual and ideological tonic. They recited the Qur'an with devotion of heart during their intimate nightly supplications, and during the day, they derived from it the strength to attack the unbelievers like roaring lions. The Qur'an had just such an expectation of those who had found their faith. Addressing the Prophet, it says:

Obey not the unbelievers, but struggle against them with it [the Qur'an] striving mightily. (25:52)

The Qur'an advises the Prophet (S) not to pay heed to the words of the infidels and to stand firmly against them equipped with the weapon of the Qur'an. It assures him that the ultimate victory shall be his. The life of the Prophet (S) itself is a positive proof of this assurance. He stood all alone against enemies without any support except the Qur'an, and the same Qur'an meant everything to him.

It produced warriors for him, furnished arms and forces, until, ultimately, the enemies were totally subdued. The Qur'an drew towards him individuals from the enemy's camp, and caused them to submit before the Messenger of God. In this way the Divine pledge was fulfilled.

When the Qur'an calls its language "the language of the heart," it means the heart which it seeks to purify, enlighten and stimulate. This language is other than the language of music that occasionally arouses sensual feelings. It is also different from the language of martial music that arouses the spirit of heroism in the hearts of soldiers and strengthens and enhances their enthusiasm. Rather, it is the language which converted the Arab Bedouins into inspired mujahidin, for whom it was said:

They carried their visions on their swords.

Those people carried their vision, their ideology, their religion and spiritual discoveries on their swords, and used them in the defence of those ideals and ideas. The notions of private and personal interest were alien to them. Though they were not innocent and infallible, and they did commit mistakes, yet they were those who rightly fitted the description:

Standing in prayer during nights,

fasting during daytime.

Every moment of day and night, they were in contact with the depths of Being. Their nights were passed in worship, and days in jihad.

It is on account of this characteristic, that the Qur'an is a book of the heart and the soul. Its appeal overwhelms the soul and brings tears flowing from the eyes and makes the heart tremble. It stresses this point and considers it true even of the "People of the Book":

الَّذِينَ آتَيْنَاهُمُ الْكِتَابَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِ هُمْ بِهِ يُؤْمِنُونَ () وَإِذَا يُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ قَالُوا آمَنَّا بِهِ إِنَّهُ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّنَا إِنَّا كُنَّا مِنْ قَبْلِهِ مُسْلِمِينَ

Those to whom We gave the Book before this believe in it, and, when it is recited to them, they say, 'We believe in it; surely it is the Truth from our Lord; even before it we were of those who surrender. (28:52-53)

It describes a group of people who undergo a state of veneration and awe when the Qur'an is recited before them. They affirm faith in all the contents of the Book, declare everything in it to be nothing but truth and their veneration of it continues to increase. In another verse, the Qur'an affirms that among the Ahl al-Kitab (The People of the Book), the Christians are closer to the Muslims than the idolaters and Jews. Then a group of Christians who believed and became Muslims on hearing the Qur'an are described in these words:

وَإِذَا سَمِعُوا مَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَى الرَّسُولِ تَرَىٰ أَعْيُنُهُمْ تَفِيضُ مِنَ الدَّمْعِ مِمَّا عَرَفُوا مِنَ الْحَقِّ ۚ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا آمَنَّا فَاكْتُبْنَا مَعَ الشَّاهِدِينَ

And when they hear what has been sent down to the Messenger, thou seest their eyes overflow with tears, because of the truth they recognize. They say, "Our Lord we believe; so do Thou write us down among the witnesses." (5:83)

In another place, while describing the believers, the Qur'an says:

اللَّهُ نَزَّلَ أَحْسَنَ الْحَدِيثِ كِتَابًا مُتَشَابِهًا مَثَانِي تَقْشَعْرُ مِنْهُ جُلُودُ الَّذِينَ يَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُمْ ثُمَّ تَلِينُ جُلُودُهُمْ وَقُلُوبُهُمْ إِلَى ذِكْرِ اللَّهِ

God has sent down the fairest discourse as a book, consimilar in its oft repeated parts, whereat shiver the skins of those who fear their Lord; then their skins and their hearts soften to the remembrance of God ... (39:23)

In these, as well as in many other verses (such as 19:58, 61:1, etc.), the Qur'an tells us that it is not merely a book of knowledge and analysis; but at the same time that it makes use of logical arguments that appeal to the intellect, it also speaks to the finer sensibilities of the human soul.

The Qur'an's Addressees

Another point that has to be inferred from the Qur'anic text during its analytical study is to determine the identity of those who are addressed by it. There are certain expressions like "guidance for the God fearing," "guidance and good tiding for the believers," "to admonish and caution him who is alive," which often recur in the Qur'an. Here the question may arise: Of what need is guidance for those who are already guided, the pious and the righteous? Moreover, we see that the Qur'an describes itself in these words:

إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكْرٌ لِلْعَالَمِينَ وَلَتَعْلَمَنَّ نَبَأَهُ بَعْدَ حِينٍ

It is but a reminder unto all beings, and you shall surely know its tiding, after a while. (38:87-88)

Then, is this book meant for all the people of the world, or is it for the believers alone? In another verse addressing the Prophet, God the Most Exalted, says:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

"We have not sent thee, save as a mercy unto all beings. " (21: 107)

A more detailed explanation of this matter would be undertaken during the course of later discussion regarding the historical aspect of the Qur'an. Here it is just sufficient to mention that the Qur'an is

addressed to all the people of the world. It does not single out any particular nation or group. Everyone who accepts the invitation of the Qur'an is assured of spiritual salvation. However, the verses which mention the Qur'an as the book of guidance for the believers and the God-fearing (mu'minin and muttaqun), clearly specify the kind of people who will be attracted towards it and others who will turn away from it.

The Qur'an never names any particular nation or tribe as being its devotees. It does not take sides with a specially chosen people. Unlike other religions, the Qur'an never associates itself with the interests of any specific class. It does not say, for example, that it has come to safeguard the interests of the workers or the peasants. The Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes the point that its purpose is to establish justice. Speaking about the prophets, it says:

لَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلَنَا بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ وَأَنْزَلْنَا مَعَهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْمِيزَانَ لِيَقُومَ النَّاسُ بِالْقِسْطِ

***“And We sent down with them the Book and the Balance so that men might uphold justice ...
“(57:25)***

The Qur'an advocates justice for all mankind, not merely for this or that class, tribe or nation. It does not, for example, like Nazism and other such cults, stir up the passions of prejudice to attract people. Similarly, it does not, like certain schools of thought like Marxism, base its appeal upon the human weakness of interest-seeking and enslavement to material motivations to incite people; because the Qur'an believes in the essential primariness of the rational consciousness of man and his intrinsic conscience.

It believes that it is on the basis of its moral potentialities and its truth-conscious human nature that mankind is placed firmly on the path of progress and evolution. This is the reason why its message is not limited to the working or farming class or exclusively to the oppressed and deprived.

The Qur'an addresses both the oppressors as well as the oppressed, and calls them to follow the right path. Prophet Moses (A) delivers the message of God to both Bani Israel and Pharaoh, and asks them to believe in the Lord and to move in His path.

Prophet Muhammad (S) extends his invitation both to the chieftains of Quraysh and to ordinary persons like Abu Dharr and 'Ammar. The Qur'an cites numerous examples of an individual's revolt against his own self and his voluntary return from the path of deviation to the straight one.

But, at the same time, the Qur'an is aware of the point that the restoration and repentance of those immersed in a life of luxury and opulence is comparatively more difficult than that of those familiar with the hardships of life: the oppressed and the deprived, who are, as a matter of fact, naturally more inclined towards justice; whereas the rich and wealthy, at the very first step, have to forgo their personal and class interests and abandon their wishes and aspirations.

The Qur'an declares that its followers are those who have a clear and pure conscience. They are drawn to it solely by the love of justice and truth, which is ingrained in the nature of all human beings ---not under the urge for material interests and worldly desires and allurements.

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