

Lesson 10: The Science of the Clear and Unclear Ayaat

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Significance

Of all the sciences of the Qur'an the science of understanding and distinguishing the clear from the unclear Ayaat is indisputably the most important science. All theological, mystical, and jurisprudential sects in Islam quote the Qur'an to prove their doctrines despite all the differences amongst them. Amazingly sometimes their doctrines contradict each other and yet the Qur'an is the reference for all of them. What is more amazing is that sometimes even an Ayah is the reference for two opposite doctrines. Both the determinists and those who believe in free will refer to the Ayah 35 of Surah al-An'am (ch.6) to prove their doctrines.

The ground for such opposite recitations of the Qur'an is 'the phenomenon of ambiguity'.

Imam Sadiq (a.s) in expressing the significance of this science in understanding the Qur'an states: "Behold!-May the Mercy of Allah be upon you- surely, whoever does not know the abrogated from the abrogating Ayaat of the Book of the Almighty Allah, and the general from the specific and the Muhkam from Motashabeh... then he does not know the Qur'an nor is he from the people of the Qur'an."

Definition

The terms used in the Qur'an for this science is 'Muhkam and Mutashabeh'. The term 'Muhkam' is driven from 'Hakama' which literally means 'prevented'.

A Muhkam Ayah means an Ayah that there is no ambiguity in understanding of its words and their meanings. A Muhkam Ayah is an Ayah that its apparent can clearly reflect its meaning with no necessary interpretation. In other words, it has an established meaning which prevents any other meanings. Thus,

we suggest that ‘Muhkam’ here means ‘clear’.

An example of a clear Ayah from the Qur’an is the following Ayah which clearly states the compensation for breaching an oath:

"Allah will not punish you for what is unintentional in your oaths, but He will punish for your deliberate oaths; for its expiation feed ten poor person, on a scale of the average of that with which you feed your own families, or clothe them or manumit a slave. But whosoever cannot afford (that), then he should fast for three days. That is the expiation for the oaths when you have sworn." (5:89)

The term ‘Mutashabeh’ literally means something that looks like other things and hence causes confusion. The Almighty Allah in the story of the cow of the Israelites quotes from them: ***"Verily, to us the cows are alike (and hence we are confused)." (2:70)***

A ‘Mutashabeh’ Ayah is an Ayah that its meaning due to different possibilities is not clear, and it is open to different interpretations. In other words, its apparent meaning does not reflect its real one. Thus, we suggest that ‘Mutashabeh’ means ‘unclear’ or ‘ambiguous’. In the coming pages we shall cite many examples of the unclear Ayaat of the Qur’an.

Divisions of the Qur’an into Muhkam and Mutashabeh

The division of the Qur’an into Muhkam and Mutashabeh is the only division that is clearly mentioned in the Qur’an. All other divisions such as abrogated and abrogating, general and specific and etc are the expressions of the scholars.

The Almighty Allah states:

"It is He Who has sent down to you the Book The Qur’an). In it are Ayaat that are Muhkam (clear), they are the foundations of the Book; and others are Mutashabeh (unclear). So as for those in whose hearts there is a deviation they follow that which is unclear thereof, seeking mischief and seeking for its hidden meaning (according to their desire), but none knows its hidden meanings save Allah and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge. (They) say: We believe in it; the whole of it are from our Lord, and none receive admonition except men of understanding." (3:7)

In the above Ayah the Almighty Allah is vividly dividing the Ayaat of the Qur’an into Muhkam and Mutashabeh. The Muhkams are the reference Ayaat which lay the foundation of the meanings of the Qur’an and to which one shall refer for understanding of the unclear Ayaat. However, those in whose hearts are deviation they abuse the ambiguous Ayaat to justify their false beliefs.

A historical example of such abuse is the mischief of Mo’awiyah who allured Samorah Bin Jondab to fabricate a Hadith that Ayah 204 and 205 of Surah al-Baqarah (ch.2) is with regards to Imam Ali (a.s)

and the Ayah 207 is allegedly praising the murderer of Imam Ali (a.s)!

This is in spite of the fact that Ayah 204 and 205 are reproaching the hypocrites and Ayah 207 is about the sacrifice of Imam Ali (a.s) when he slept in the Prophet's bed for the protection of the Prophet of Islam (S) when he was secretly migrating from Makka to Madina.

Is there any Unclear Ayah in the Qur'an?

Although the Qur'an is quite explicit that there are clear and unclear Ayaat in the Qur'an, scholars disagree as whether there is any ambiguous Ayah in the Qur'an. The followings are the main views:

1. There is no unclear Ayah in the Qur'an

The first view is of those who deny any ambiguity in the Qur'an. They claim that the Almighty Allah states:

"This (the Qur'an) is a plain statement for mankind, a guidance." (3:138)

Had the Qur'an been ambiguous it would have not been a plain statement and a guidance.

The Almighty Allah also states:

"(This is) a Book, the Ayaat whereof are well established." (11:1)

They further explain that the 'ambiguous Ayaat' as stated in the Ayah 7 of the third chapter of the Qur'an, are only for those in whose hearts there is a deviation. The Qur'an is like a dispensary of medicine in which ***"there is a healing and a mercy to those who believe, but it increases the wrong doers nothing but loss." (Surah al-Esra', 17: 82).***

2. The entire Qur'an is ambiguous

Contrary to the first opinion, the common view of the traditionalists (Akhbariyyoun) is that the entire Qur'an is ambiguous. The ordinary people have no access to its understanding save by referring to the Ahadeeth of the Ma'soomin.

The often base their view on Surah al-Zumar in which Allah states: ***"Allah has sent down the Best Statement, a Book (this Qur'an that is) Mutashabeh oft-repeated."(39:23)***

They also refer to the Ahadeeth in which the Imams of Ahlul Bayt (a.s) stated: "Surely he knows the Qur'an to whom it was revealed."

3. There are clear and unclear Ayaat in the Qur'an

The soundest opinion is to suggest –as clearly mentioned in the Qur'an– that in fact there are Ayaat with

clear meanings, as there are unclear Ayaat. Different views about the topic are one of the best proofs for the existence of the ambiguity in the Qur'an.

We disagree with the first view for the following reasons:

Ayah 7 of Surah 3 clearly divides the Ayaat of the Qur'an into two categories of 'clear' and 'unclear' Ayaat. It then explains further that those in whose hearts there is a deviation abuse the ambiguous Ayaat. Thus, the ambiguity is already there in the Qur'an. Had the Ayaat of the Qur'an been all clear with established meanings, none would have been able to abuse them.

We agree that the Qur'an is a 'clear statement' and 'guidance' for mankind, as stated in Surah 3 Ayah 138. However, this does not necessitate that all people have to understand the entire Qur'an. The reality is that majority of people do not understand the meanings of the whole Qur'an. Nonetheless, as long as they can refer to the experts who know the meaning of the Qur'an and learn from them, it is true to state that the Qur'an is a book of guidance for mankind.

We also agree that the Qur'an is a book which its Ayaat are well established as stated in the beginning of Surah 11. However, we suggest that it means the Qur'an in its essence and from the view of its Speaker is not ambiguous. Similarly, there is no ambiguity in the Qur'an for he to whom (S) the Qur'an was revealed. Thus, we disagree with those scholars who suggest 'there is an essential ambiguity in the Qur'an.' Had the Qur'an been ambiguous in its very essence, none would have even been able to understand its true meaning including the Prophet of Islam (S).

Therefore, although the Qur'an is clear in its essence, some of its Ayaat are unclear for certain people due to their lack of knowledge. It is for this reason that the number of the ambiguity of the Ayaat varies from a person to another.

Similarly to suggest that all the Ayaat of the Qur'an are ambiguous contradicts the Qur'an (ch.3 Ayah 7). Ironically, they have even referred to the Qur'an (ch.39 Ayah 23) to prove their point! If the Qur'an is ambiguous how can they refer to it?! Although their understanding of the Ayah is undoubtedly wrong, otherwise the Ayah would be in conflict with the Ayah 7 of Surah 3. The meaning of 'Kitaban Motashabehan' (39:23) is that the Qur'an is a Book that all its parts resemble one another and they are all harmonious as stated in the previous lesson.

In conclusion, there is a way to reconcile between the first view and the third, i.e. the Qur'an in its essence is clear, although some of its Ayaat are ambiguous for majority of people due to their own ignorance.

The Number of the Unclear Ayaat

Some of the contemporary scholars of the Qur'an assert that the unclear Ayaat of the Qur'an in comparison to the clear ones are very few. He suggests that the unclear Ayaat do not exceed two

hundreds in number. Moreover, many scholars of the Qur'an suggest there is no unclear Ayah in the jurisprudential Ayaat of the Qur'an.

Unfortunately, we cannot agree with any of the above claims. Surely, the definition of the scholars for the unclear Ayah applies to more than two hundred Ayaat. Similarly, some of the jurisprudential Ayaat of the Qur'an are also ambiguous, or else, there would not have been any jurisprudential differences among the Muslims. For instance, the method of performing Wudhu is described in Surah 5 Ayah 6. If the term 'your feet' is connected to the 'your heads' then the feet has to be rubbed on (as the Shi'a do), but if 'your feet' is connected to the 'your forearms' then the feet ought to be washed (as the Sunnis do).

The Most Ambiguous Ayaat of the Qur'an

As far as I know the most ambiguous and controversial Ayaat in the Qur'an are the followings:

1. al-Horooof al-Moqatta'a (the Separated Letters): Twenty-nine chapters of the Qur'an are prefixed with certain letters of the Arabic alphabet. Ever since the Qur'an was revealed more than 14 centuries ago, Muslim and orientalist scholars have been trying to decipher the meaning and possible significance of these mysterious Qur'anic initials, but to no avail. They remained a mystery to all. Even Rashad Khalifa who claimed he had been able to decode those letters went astray by deleting the last two Ayah of Surah 9 to match the Qur'an with his calculations!
2. Ayah 102 of Surah al-Baqarah (ch.2): According to Allamah Tabatabai the possible meanings of this Ayah are $X \times 4$ which is over one million possibilities! It seems that there is no any other Ayah in the Qur'an with the many possible meanings.
3. Ayah 7 of Surah 3: Amazingly part of the Ayah that divides the Qur'an into clear and unclear Ayaat is also one of the most controversial unclear Ayaat. As the ambiguity in this Ayah is related to our discussion, I shall elaborate on it.

To understand the point of ambiguity in the Ayah I need to take you for a short detour. No doubt punctuations have delicate significance in understanding the text. Sometimes a comma would be necessary in a sentence because the sentence would be ambiguous without it. Consider the following pair of sentences:

Ahmad, said Ali, did not go to school yesterday.

Ahmad said, Ali did not go to school yesterday.

According to the first sentence, it is Ahmad who did not go to school, whereas according to the second, Ali did not go to school. The only way to understand the above meanings is by the aid of the punctuation sign (,).

The Almighty Allah in part of Ayah 7 Surah 3 states:

"and none knows its hidden meaning save Allah, and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge (they) say: We believe in it."(3:7)

If there is a comma and hence we pause after 'Allah', then it means only Allah knows the meaning of the unclear Ayaat, whereas if there is no comma after Allah and the term 'and' after Allah is a coordinating conjunction, then it means Allah as well as those who are firmly grounded in knowledge know the meaning of the unclear Ayaat.

The scholars of the Qur'an hold three different views for recitation of the above Ayah.

1. Recitation of Pause

Majority of the Sunni scholars are of the view that there should be a comma after the Glorious term 'Allah'. Thus, they put the sign after Allah which means it is preferred to pause. Most of the Shi'a publications have unknowingly just reprinted the Qur'an with the same punctuation sign. Accordingly, many of the Shi'a English translators of the Qur'an have also translated the Ayah without realisation of the consequences of their translations.

2. Recitation of Conjunction

Majority of the Shi'a scholars preferred the conjunction of 'those who are firmly grounded in knowledge' to 'Allah'. Some of the outstanding Sunni scholars and linguists have also hold the same opinion. For instance, amongst the Sunni scholars 'Mojahed', Nahhas, Akbari (the famous Arabic grammarian), Zamakhshari, Baydhwai, Zarkashi and Muhammad Abdo preferred this recitation. In many authentic narrations it is also narrated from the Imams of Ahlul Bayt (a.s) to have said: "We are those who are firmly grounded in knowledge, thus, we know its hidden meaning."

3. Both Recitations are correct

The third view is the opinion of those Shi'a and Sunni scholars who consider both of the above recitations correct. Sheikh Tousi, Allamah Tabatabai from the Shi'a scholars, and Ibn Katheer, Ragheb in al-Mofradaat and al-Darwish; the contemporary Arabic grammarian are the Sunni scholars who agreed with the both recitations.

Why the recitation of conjunction must be preferred?

We agree with the second view that the term 'and' in the Ayah is for coordinating conjunction. In addition to the Ahadeeth of Ahlul Bayt (a.s) we can suggest the following reasons for the preference of the second view:

a. There are many Ayaat in the Qur'an that confirm 'people of knowledge' know the meanings of the

unclear Ayaat. Consider the following examples:

- ***"Nay, but it (the Qur'an) is clear Ayaat in the hearts of those who have been given knowledge."***
(29:49)

- ***"So ask of those who know the Scripture if you know not."*** (16:43, 22:7)

b. The Qur'an is the book of guidance, and hence it is sent down in the language of humans to be understood. Thus the Almighty Allah in various Ayaat is inviting man to reflect on it. (4:82, 23: 68, 38:29, 47:24) How could Allah command man to reflect on the Qur'an whilst he is unable to understand quite a big portion of it?!

c. The expression of 'and those who are grounded in knowledge' obviously shows a preference for those learned people over others. That means they have obtained type of knowledge that other don't. If they only say 'we believe in it, it is all from our Lord' then there is no privilege for them over the rest of the believers who would have the same expression.

c. The result of the first view is to suggest that even the Prophet (S) does not know the meaning of the unclear Ayaat! Would it be possible for a Muslim to hold this view?!

d. Throughout the Islamic history many Muslim scholars whether Shi'a or Sunni have interpreted the entire Qur'an. They have even endeavoured to suggest some meanings to the most secretive words of the Qur'an, i.e. the Separated Letters. If none other than Allah knows the meaning of the unclear Ayaat why do the scholars interpret the Qur'an?!

e. All of the above arguments was on the basis that the pronoun 'its' in 'and none knows its hidden meaning' refers to 'that which is unclear'. If we however, suggest- as it is possible- that the pronoun refers to the 'Qur'an' then the recitation of pause would be the most horrible suggestion. For it would conclude that none would know the meanings of and parts of the Qur'an including the Prophet (S)!!

Why there is ambiguity in the Qur'an?

The above question is one of the common questions asked by believers and non-believers. Many wonder how could a divine book which is for the guidance of man contains so many unclear statements. In fact, if all the Ayaat of the Qur'an had clear meanings would there be still many schools of thoughts in Islam?

In our course on 'Philosophy of Religion' we dealt with this question from the theological as well as linguistic views (lesson 25, 26). In short the followings are some of the main reasons for the phenomenon of ambiguity in the Qur'an.

1. Ambiguity and none restriction of a word to one particular meaning is part of the nature of human

language. Very often words are not sufficient to transfer a concept from one's mind to another. How often after a verbal communication we complain to each other: "you didn't understand me." "That is not what I meant". The ambiguity of the text is even more severe for the speaker is not around to explain his words any further. An Arabic poem says:

A cloth that is sewed by twenty nine letters

Is too short for its highness

Religious texts are inevitably written in human language and hence they would suffer the same phenomenon.

2. The advantage of the Qur'an is that the above phenomenon is treated by revelation of clear Ayaat. As we shall see the key to understanding most of the unclear Ayaat is to refer to the clear Ayaat.

3. Very often the ambiguity is related to the lack of knowledge of the reader of the Qur'an not the text itself. The Almighty Allah in communicating man has utilized linguistic styles known to man including all arts of allegorical, figurative, proverbs and all other styles of conversation. Ignoring the arts of rhetoric is a common cause of assuming ambiguity in the Qur'an. For instance, the Almighty Allah with regards to the time of fasting states:

"...and eat and drink until the white thread of dawn appears to you distinct from the black thread."
(2:187)

When the above Ayah was revealed one of the Muslims ('Oday Bin Hatam) kept a white and a black thread with him to find out the time of morning dawn! The Messenger of Allah (S) said to him: "The white thread and the black one is an expression for the morning light amidst the darkness of the night."

4. Many so called ambiguous Ayaat are in fact considered today ambiguous due to misinterpretations of the various Islamic sects that emerged throughout history. The pioneers as well as the followers of those sects interpreted the Qur'an according to their whim and desire to suite their school of thought. Very often the sectarianism has been the cause of ambiguity in the Qur'an not the other way round.

For instance, the Almighty Allah in description of the Hereafter states:

"Some faces that Day shall be shining. Looking at their Lord." (75:23)

Arabs at the time of the Prophet (S) whose mind was free from theological arguments of the second and the third century would never interpret the above Ayah to mean a physical look.

5. In linguistics there is a discussion as whether or not it is permissible for a speaker to mean more than one meaning for his statement. We discussed the topic in 'semantic issues' of our course on 'Principles of jurisprudence' and concluded that there is no problem to use a homonym and even mean all of them.

For instance, when Romeo said to Juliet: "You ask for me tomorrow; and you shall find me a grave man." By the expression of 'grave man' he could mean a dignified man or a man buried in his grave. Both of the meanings are possible.

Similarly, if there are more than one million meanings for an Ayah of the Qur'an, there is no reason to limit its meaning to one as long as other meanings are not contradictory to the principles of the Qur'an. As a matter of fact, such expressions are one of the admired aspects of rhetoric which make a literature stand above the rest.

For instance, the passive and the active form of the Arabic verb 'Laa Yodharra' is the same. This verb is used in Surah 2 Ayah 282. If the verb be an active verb, then the phrase means: "a scribe and a witness shall not harm (the one who concludes a contract)." Whereas, if the verb be a passive verb it means: "let neither scribe nor witness suffer any harm." I suggest both of the meanings are correct as it is possible that the Almighty Allah means both of them. For, the general message of the Ayah is in a financial contract no one shall harm anyone neither shall be harmed.

Types of Unclear Ayaat in the Qur'an

Examples

Letters: The example of the unclear letters are the 'Separated Letters' (al-Horooful-Moqatta').

Homonym: The examples of a word which has more than one meaning in the Qur'an are: "**Qaswarah**" (74:51) which means 'hunter' and 'lion'. Both of the meanings in the Ayah could be meant. Similarly, '**As'as** (81:17) means the arrival of the night as well as its departure.

One meaning, different applications: For example, the expression 'by the Ten Nights' (89:2) could mean the first ten nights of Muharram, or the last ten nights of Ramadhan or the first ten nights of Thol-Hajjah, etc.

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