

# Lesson 11: Analysis of Some of the Unclear Ayaat (Paradoxical Ayaat)

In this lesson we shall demonstrate some examples from the unclear Ayaat which seem paradoxical. [1](#)

## 1. Monotheism or Pluralism (the Paradox of I or We)

Islam is a monotheistic religion. Indisputably, monotheism is the bedrock of Islam. The most precise concept of monotheism is presented by Islam. The Glorious Name 'Allah' is so chosen to refer to His Majesty for– unlike 'God' in English– it cannot be even literally used in a plural or male or female form. Nonetheless, the Almighty Allah very often utilises the plural pronoun of 'WE' to refer to deity. For instance, the Qur'an uses this plural pronoun 22 times with reference to the creation. Consider the following examples:

***"And indeed, We created man from dried clay.." (15:26)***

***"And We created not the heavens and the earth and all that is between them except with truth." (15:85)***

***"Or did We create the angels female while they were witnesses?" (37: 150)***

***"Is it you who create it, or are We the Creator?" (56:59)***

The above and many such examples in the Qur'an have caused confusion for some non-Muslims as well as Muslims who are unaware of the rhetorical styles of human literature.

The followings are the main answers suggested by Muslim scholars:

### 'We' is an expression for God and His agents

The supporters of this theory suggest that the Divine Attributes of Essence belongs to God alone. Thus,

the exalted term 'Allah' is always used in a singular form. The Divine Attributes of Action, on the other hand, are acts that the Almighty God fulfils via His agents. For instance, God sends the revelation to the Prophets, creates humans and sends rain and etc. by His angels. Thus He states:

- ***"And We send down pure water from the sky." (25:48)***

- ***"Surely, We have sent down to you the Book." (4: 105)***

## **Problem**

This suggestion is not compatible with the pure concept of monotheism. The agents of God are not equal to Him to refer to them as 'We'. Besides, the Almighty God has used the plural pronoun when describing the creation of the angels too.

***"Or did We create the angels female while they were witnesses?" (37: 150)***

Moreover, there are many contradictions to the above suggestion. Consider the following examples:

a) The Almighty God with reference to the selection of Ibrahim for Prophecy states: ***"Truly We chose him in this world." (2: 130)***. Surely the selection of a human as a prophet does not need the interference of the angels. 'Selection' is purely a divine act. Thus, Allah states: ***"Allah chooses Messengers from angels and men." (22:75)***. Similarly, in His private conversation with Moses, the Almighty Allah states: ***"O Moses! I have chosen you above men by My Messages." (7: 144)***

b) Several times the Almighty Allah uses the pronoun 'We' for referring to Himself to be worshipped. For instance, in praising His Messengers He states: ***"And of Us (alone) they were the worshippers." (21:73)***. Would it be possible to include the agents of God as part of those to be worshipped?! Or would it be possible for the prophets to worship the agents of God too?!

## **'WE' is an expression of Glorification**

In the Arabic language similar to many other languages, the plural pronouns 'they', 'you' and 'we' are all to refer to more than one person. However, there is an essential difference between the pronoun 'We' and 'they' and 'You' in that We is not necessarily for a numerical plural. It is often used for glorification and exalting. This usage is commonly used by the kings and the heads of the states when issuing a statement. For instance, the Queen of England states, "We the Queen of England..." Obviously there is only one Queen in England thus 'We' in this context does not mean plurality.

The Almighty God in His conversation with man utilizes the linguistic styles that are known to man thus, nowhere in the Qur'an is ever referred to Him as They or You (in a plural sense). Neither does He ever – we suggest – use the term 'We' to refer to Himself and His agents. The expression of 'We' in the Qur'an is therefore exclusively for glorification of God. Ignoring this linguistic point most of the translators of the Qur'an Muslims and non-Muslims, Shia and Sunni alike have mistranslated Ayah 59 of Surah 56. Yusuf

Ali, Shakir, Irving, Arberry and many other English translators of the Qur'an have incorrectly translated the Ayah as follows: "Is it ye who created or are We the Creators?" Although the term used in the Qur'an isal-Khaliquun it does not mean the creators. The correct translation is what Dr Al-Hillali and Mohsin Khan have suggested in their translations "Is it you who created, or are We the Creator (without s)?"

In support of this suggestion we can confirm that the pronouns 'they' and 'you' (plural) have never been used in the Qur'an with reference to God for instance, it is never said in the Qur'an 'They sent down water from the sky' rather Allah states, "**He sends down water.**" (13:17). Yet He states "**And We send down pure water from the sky.**" (25:48). Therefore, had the meaning of 'We sent down' was a numerical plural to mean God and His agents, He should have also used the plural pronoun of 'they' to refer to Himself and His agents, yet he has never used this expression.[2](#)

## 2. Determinism or Free Will

One of the most controversial discussions in the history of philosophy is the argument of fate of free will. From the perspective of the Qur'an is there any determinism or free will? While it appears from many Ayat of the Qur'an that Allah condones the concept of determinism many other Ayaat confirm free will. From the end of the second Islamic century two theological sects emerged in the Sunni School of Thought: i.e. the Ash'ari who were the advocates of Determinism and the Mo'tazeli who supported Free Will. Interestingly, both of them prove their doctrines from the Qur'an.

For instance, Imam Fakhr Razi (died 606AH) who was Ash'ari and believed in Determinism cites numerous examples throughout his interpretation of the Qur'an to prove the dogma of Determinism. On the other hand, Zamakhshari (died 538AH) who was Mo'tazeli and believed in Free Will cites many Ayaat in the Qur'an in his interpretation of the Qur'an 'Al-Kashaf' to prove Free Will. Amazingly, the two groups referred to Ayah 35 of Surah 6 to prove their doctrines. The Almighty God states, "**And had Allah willed, He would have gathered them together (all) on true guidance.**"(6:35)

Similar to this is also mentioned in Surah 19 Ayah 99. The Determinists refer to the Ayah to conclude that the reason that all mankind do not believe in God is because God did not so will. Thus all man cannot believe in God for it is against the will of God. On the other hand, the followers of Free Will refer to the same Ayah to conclude that had God willed He would have been able to make all men –like angels– to be guided and be obedient to Him without any Free Will of disobeying Him. But God did not so will and hence man has Free Will to choose good or evil. Further explanation and the correct answer should be sought in my article 'Einstein's Paradox'.

## 3. Who Guides Who Misleads – God, Man or Satan?

The concept of guidance and misleading is also one of the very paradoxical concepts in the Qur'an. The question is, whether or not man is in charge of his misguidance or is it the will of God or Satan is the cause of man's deviation from the right path?

An unprofessional approach to the Qur'an leaves us with nothing other than a plain paradox:

a- Some of the Ayaat of the Qur'an hold man responsible for his deviation:

- ***"And he who changes faith for disbelief, verily he has gone astray from the right way." (2: 108)***

- ***"These are they who have purchased error for guidance." (2: 16)***

b- Other Ayaat of the Qur'an hold some men the cause of misleading others:

- ***"And Pharaoh led his people astray." (20: 79)***

c- Some of the Ayaat of the Qur'an introduces Satan as the cause of peoples misguidance:

- ***"And indeed he (Satan) did lead astray a great multitude of you." (36:62)***

d- Sometimes man and the jinn are the causes of misleading:

- ***"And those who disbelieve will say 'Our Lord show us those among jinn and man who led us astray.'" (41:29)***

e- Many other Ayaat of the Qur'an introduces Allah as the cause of guidance and misguidance:

- ***"Do you want to guide him whom Allah has made to go astray? And he whom Allah has made to go astray, you will never find for him any way (of guidance)." (4:88)***

- ***"Verily Allah sends astray whom He wills, and guides whom He wills." (35:8)***

What shall we do with all these paradoxical statements? What is the Islamic stand with regards to man's guidance and misguidance?

The argument of guidance and misguidance is one of the branches of fate and free will. Thus, the followers of fate in justification of their doctrine refer to the Ayaat in which guidance and misguidance are introduced as acts of God. On the other hand, the followers of free will quote the Ayaat that hold man responsible for his misguidance. The fact is we should not form any opinion based on some of the Ayaat of the Qur'an whilst ignoring the rest. The Almighty God in condemnation of this approach quotes from the disbelievers,

***"They say we believe in some and reject others, and wish to adopt a way in-between." (4: 150)***

We suggest that there is no contradiction between the above Ayaat, man's guidance and misguidance are the effects of several causes some of which are internal and related to man's lust and desires while others are external and are introduced to him by Satanic Jinn and man. Thus, it is correct to relate misguidance to man as well as the Jinn as parts of the causes of misguidance. Similarly, relating guidance and misguidance to God is also correct in that it is He who provided the means of guidance

and misguidance for mankind.

For instance, Allah has created a physical law in this world called gravity. When a suicidal person jumps off a cliff, he would not have died had the law of gravity not exist. Thus, in a sense God is the cause of his death although He is not responsible for he has misused the law of gravity. Similarly, the Almighty Allah has shown man what leads him to guidance and misguidance and has left the decision making to himself. It is Allah who has given the property of guidance and prosperity to piety and righteousness and it is Allah who has given the property of misguidance to oppression and disbelief. Therefore, although Allah guides whoever He wills and makes go astray who He wills, He never wills a pious man to go astray nor does He will to guide an oppressor for there are no such properties in their actions. Please reflect on the following Ayaat:

***"And He misleads thereby only those who are the rebellious." (2:26)***

***"And Allah will cause to go astray those who are wrongdoers." (14:27)***

***"Thus Allah leaves astray him who is a musref (a criminal)." (40:34)***

***"Thus Allah leads astray the disbelievers." (40:74)***

***"Whoever follows My Guidance he shall neither go astray, nor shall be distressed." (20: 123)***

Therefore, when a man abuses the facilities provided to him by God he will go astray. Allah states,

***"So when they turned away, Allah turned their hearts away and Allah guides not the people who are Fasiqeen (the rebellious)." (61:5)***

## **4. Paradoxical Statement Due to Different Conditions**

One of the aspects of the paradoxical statements in the Qur'an is due to different circumstances and conditions. For instance, the Almighty Allah sometimes invites His Messenger to agree on peace with the infidels:

***"But if they incline to peace, you also incline to it, and trust in Allah." (8:61)***

However, somewhere else He clearly prohibits calling for peace:

***"So be not weak and ask not for peace while you are having the upper hand." (47:35)***

The Almighty Allah sometimes invites the believers to forgive the disbeliever and tolerate their mistakes:

***"Say to the believers to forgive those who hope not for the Days of Allah." (45: 14)***

But somewhere else in the Qur'an He is commanding the believers to fight the disbelievers whenever

they find them:

***"Then kill the disbelievers wherever you find them and capture them and besiege them." (9:5)***

The solution of such paradoxical statements rests with the consideration of different circumstances and people. For instance, Ayah 14 of Surah 45 was revealed to the Prophet (S) when he was in Makka wherein the Muslims were in minority. The Ayah also applies to those Kuffar who insult Muslims ignorantly. In such circumstances, it is the duty of Muslims to forgive the wrong doers. The Ayah 5 of Surah 9, on the other hand, is a military command that is issued during a battlefield. Similarly, the recommendation to peace is for a situation wherein making peace would be beneficial for Muslims, but if calling for peace is a military trick then it is the application for Ayah 35 of Surah 47 in which making peace with the enemies is prohibited.

## **5. Paradoxical Statements Due to Variety of Aspects of a Narration**

Sometimes the narrations of the Qur'an concerning an event seem paradoxical. The stories of the Prophets are narrated in various parts of the Qur'an. These narrations sometimes seem a little different from each other. For instance, the conversation of Moses to his family on the way to Egypt (a.s) when he saw the fire is narrated quite different in three different chapters of the Qur'an:

***a. "When Moses said to his household: Verily, I have seen a fire; I will bring you from there some information, or I will bring you a burning brand, that you may warm yourselves." (27:7)***

***b. "when he saw a fire, he said to his family: Wait! Verily, I have seen a fire; perhaps I can bring you some burning brand therefrom, or find some guidance at the fire."(20: 10)***

***c. "Then, when Moses had fulfilled the term, and was travelling with his family, he saw a fire in the direction of Tur (mountain). He said to his family: Wait, I have seen a fire; perhaps I may bring you from there some information, or a burning fire-brand that you may warm yourselves. (28:29)***

Although the message of all of the above narrations is the same, the quotations of the words of Moses are not exactly the same.

This minor variety is due to a linguistic art. Very often the Qur'an conveys its teachings through narration of the stories of the previous nations and Prophets. As such sometimes it is necessary to repeat a story for different concepts it contains. However, to avoid verbal repetition at every narration one aspect of the story is mentioned. For verbal repetition reduces the eloquence of the narration.

## 6. Paradox Due to the Arts of Rhetoric

Sometimes the Ayaat of the Qur'an seem paradoxical if the reader is not familiar with the Arabic rules and the arts of rhetoric. The followings are some examples of such paradoxical statements.

6/1: The Almighty Allah has states in five different parts of the Qur'an that the heavens and the earth are created in six periods. (6:54, 10:3, 25:59, 32:4 and 50:38)

On the other hand, according to the description of Surah al-Fossil (ch.41) the total periods of the creation of heavens and the earth seem to be eight periods:

***"Say: Do you verily disbelieve in Him who created the earth in two Days? And you set up rivals with Him? That is the Lord of the worlds. He placed therein firm mountains from above it, and He blessed it, and measured therein its sustenance in four Days equal for all those who ask. Then He rose over towards the heaven... then He completed and finished from their creation (as) seven heavens in two Days and He made in each heaven its affair." (41:9-12)***

The solution of the above paradox is that in the above Ayah the art of 'deletion' (Hazf)<sup>3</sup> is utilised. In the Ayah "and measured therein its sustenance in four Days", the phrase 'in the rest of' or 'all of which was' is deleted. Thus, the Ayah has been like this: "and measure therein its substance in (the rest of) four Days." Or "and measured therein its sustenance (all of which was) in four Days."<sup>4</sup> Thus, according to the above Ayaat the earth and all its details are created in four periods and the heavens in two periods the total of which will be six periods.

6/2: Another paradox in the above Ayaat appears about the order of creation of heaven and the earth. The Almighty Allah in the Ayah 12 of the above Surah after description of the creation of the earth and its inhabitant states: ***"then He completed and finished from their creation (as) seven heavens in two Days." (41: 12)***. The term 'then' would suggest that heaven were created after the earth!

Scientific discoveries have confirmed that the creation of the earth is after the creation of the heavens and all other galaxies. This fact is also confirmed in the Qur'an:

***"Are you more difficult to create or is the heaven that He constructed? He raised its height, and has perfected it. Its night He covers with darkness and its forenoon He brings out (with light). And after that He spread the earth." (79:27-33)***

The solution of this paradox is that the Arabic term 'Thumma' (then) is used to express a proceeding action or description. The term 'then' in the Ayah under consideration is used for proceeding description. That means the Almighty Allah describes the creation of heaven after the description of the creation of the earth, although the creation of the heaven occurred prior to the earth, the purpose of this type of description is to introduce to man the creation of the world around him and then the world above him.

- [1.](#) A paradox is a seemingly contradictory statement that may nonetheless be true.
  - [2.](#) For further discussion on this paradox see chapter 16 of 'Philosophy of Religion'
  - [3.](#) Hazf or Tajrid is one of the rhetoric arts related to the meaning of the sentence. This art is very often used in poetry and rhetoric literature. Another example of 'Hazf' in the Qur'an is mentioned in the story of Yusuf: "And ask the town where we have been." (12:82). The meaning of 'ask the town' is 'ask the people of the town', the deletion of 'the people of' is an art of Hazf. For further explanation about the art of deletion see: al-Taftazani, Sharh al-Mokhtasar, p.166
  - [4.](#) Zamakhshari, al-Kashaf.
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