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Part 1: Understanding the Quran Analytically

In this chapter we wish to review the Quran's contents. Of course, if we were to deal with each subject of the Quran separately, we would need about two hundred kilos of paper. So we will deal firstly with the generalities and then with a few particularities.

The Quran has dealt with many issues, and amongst these it has put a lot of emphasis on some and less on others. Amongst the issues which have been raised in the Quran are the God of existence and existence. We must look to see how the Quran has introduced God. Does it introduce Him philosophically or gnostically? Does it have the form of other religious books like the Torah and Bible, or the form of those of India? Or does it enjoy the benefits of an independent style of its own in this important subject?

One of the other issues introduced in the Quran is existence. We must review the way the Quran looks at existence. Does it consider the material existence of creation to be a vain toy or does it consider it to have validity? Does it consider the currents of existence to be based upon a chain of principles and laws, or does it count them as being haphazard so that no one thing is the cause or condition of any other thing?

Amongst the general issues raised in the Quran is the issue of the human being. The view of the Quran towards the human being must be analysed. Does the Quran speak optimistically about the human being, or is it pessimistic about him? Does it count him as insignificant or does it maintain for him honour and respect?

Another issue is the issue of the human society. Does the Quran credit human society with a personality of its own or does it only take into account the personality of the individual? In the view of the Quran, does society have life, death, progress, and retrogression, or are these only considered true of the individual? And here, the issue of history is raised. What is the Quranic view about history? What does the Quran see as being the influential forces of history, and to what extent does the individual have an effect on history?

There are many other questions that are raised in the Quran, and amongst these is the view of the Quran towards itself. Then there is the issue of the Prophet and how the Quran introduces him. Another issue is how the Quran describes the believer, what characteristics it describes him as having, and so on. Furthermore, each of these general points has its own special branches. As an example, when discussing the human being we have no choice but to branch into human ethics. Or, when we are discussing the issue of society, we have to talk about inter-individual relationships, social distinctions and classes, *amr bil-ma'ruf wa nahyan al-munkar*¹, and so on.

How Does the Quran Introduce Itself?

In analysing the Quran's contents, it is better to start by looking to see how the Quran introduces itself. The first point that the Quran makes about itself is that its words and phrases are the Word of God. The Quran makes it clear that its composer was not the Prophet and that he only relayed and explained what was revealed to him through the Holy Spirit, the angel Gabriel.

Another explanation that the Quran makes about itself is its message, which consists of guiding the sons of mankind on the path from darkness to light:

"A book that we revealed to you to bring mankind out of darkness into light." (14:1)

Without doubt, one of the truest forms of this darkness is ignorance, and the Quran carries mankind from this darkness to the brilliance of knowledge. If, however, all the forms of darkness could be considered as solely ignorance, philosophy could also have performed this urgent task. However, there exist other forms of darkness which are at levels of darkness more dangerous than the darkness of ignorance, the fighting of which is outside the jurisdiction of philosophy. Amongst these forms of darkness are the worship of material benefits, selfishness, enslavement to desires, and so on, which are counted as being amongst the forms of individual and ethical darkness. There are also similar forms of social darkness such as oppression and discrimination, and so on. In Arabic the word *zulm*, the equivalent of which in English is injustice and oppression, is from the root of "darkness" (*zulumah*), which shows that it is a form of social and spiritual darkness. Opposition and struggle against these forms of darkness is the responsibility of the Quran and the other heavenly books.

The Quran, in an address to the Prophet Moses (a.s.) says:

"To bring out your people from darkness into light." (14:5)

This darkness is the darkness of the oppression of Pharaoh and his clique, and the light the light of freedom and justice.

A point which the Quranic commentators have called attention to is that whenever darkness has been mentioned it has been done so in the plural form with the definitive prefix "al" (*alef* and *lam*), and thus includes all types of darkness. Light, on the other hand, is always mentioned in the singular, and this

indicates that the right path is no more than one, while the ways of deviation and damage are many.

In this manner the Quran defines its goal: the tearing apart of the chains of ignorance, deception, oppression, ethical and social corruption, and, in a word, the destruction of all the forms of darkness, and guidance towards justice, goodness and light.

Understanding the Quranic Language

Another issue is the issue of understanding the language of the Quran and how to read it. Some people have the idea that to read the Quran means just to recite it with the intention of earning divine rewards (*thawab*), without perceiving anything of its meaning. They continually recite the whole Quran over and over again, but when asked whether they know the meaning of what they have recited, they are unable to answer. To recite the Quran is good and necessary from the point of view of it being the means for understanding the meaning of the Quran, not simply as a means of divine rewards in itself.

Perceiving the Quran's meaning also has particulars which must be observed. In studying many books, what the reader learns is a chain of fresh ideas which were previously unknown to him. Here, it is only the reader's reason and power of thought and reflection that becomes occupied. Coming to the Quran, there is no doubt that it must be read with the intention of learning. The Quran itself makes this clear:

"A blessed book, we have revealed to you, for them to reflect on its signs (ayat) and for the possessors of understanding to bear (the reality) in mind." (38:29).

One of the Quran's duties is to teach and instruct. Here, the Quran addresses itself to human reason, speaking in the language of logic. Apart from this language, however, the Quran also has another language in which it addresses not reason but the heart. This language is the language of emotion. Whoever wants to understand the Quran and become intimate with it must be acquainted with both these two languages, and must benefit from them both side by side. To separate these two languages, one from the other, would be a source of errors and mistakes, damage and loss.

That which is termed *the heart* consists of feelings that are extremely great and profound, which exist in the interior of the human being, and which are sometimes called "feelings of existence", i.e. the feeling of the relation between the human being and absolute existence.

Anyone who knows the language of the heart and addresses a person with that language – appealing to the heart – animates that person from the very depths of his being. In such a case, it is no longer merely the person's thought that is affected, but the whole of his existence. As a sample of the language of the heart perhaps we can cite music. All the different types of music are in one way alike, which is in the fact that they affect human emotions. Music excites the human soul and puts the human, emotionally, in a special world.

Of course, the types of feelings and excitement that are produced depend upon the types of music, and

are varied. It is possible for one kind of music to deal with courage and valour and speak to the human in this language. We all know how military airs and songs are performed on battlefields and how sometimes the effect of such songs is so strong that it persuades soldiers who were previously too afraid to leave their bunkers to go forward in the face of grave enemy attacks and meet the enemy on the open field.

A different type of music will possibly deal with sensual emotions and invite the human to weakness and abandonment and submission to vice and corruption. It has been seen how great the effect of music is in this field; perhaps nothing else can have such an affect in breaking down the walls of chastity and morality. Other instincts and feelings, when things are said in the language of these emotions – and it makes no difference whether they are said by means of music or other than music – can also be brought under control and directed.

One of the most sublime instincts and emotions of the human being is his religious feeling and God-seeking nature, and what the Quran attends to is this holy and superior emotion.

The Quran itself contains the instruction that it is to be recited finely and beautifully, for it is in this way that the Quran speaks directly to the human's divine nature (*fitrat*) and conquers it.² The Quran, in describing itself, maintains that it has two languages. Sometimes it introduces itself as being a book of logic, reason, and reflection, and sometimes a book of emotion and love. In other words, the Quran is not only the food of human reason and reflection, but is also the food of the human heart and soul.

The Quran emphasizes a lot of its subjects with its own special "music". A music the effect of which in raising the profound and sublime feelings of the human being is greater than any other. The Quran instructs the believers to engage themselves during a part of each night in reciting the Quran, and for them to recite it during their prayers, when their attention is directed towards God. Addressing itself to the Prophet, the Quran says:

"O (you) covered-up! Stand the night (in worship) except for a little." (73:1-2)

Most of the Prophet's night was for prayer and a little for sleep. He was to get up and worship his God intimately. And, while in worship, he was to recite the Quran gently; not so fast that its words could not be understood nor with so many pauses that the relation between words would be obscure. He was to recite the Quran deliberately, while paying attention to its contents. And, in a later verse of the same surah, he is told that when he has more need of sleep because of his actions of the day, like trading and *jihad* in the path of God, still he is not to forget to seclude himself in worship.

Amongst the early Muslims, one of the things that was a great source of happiness and a means of spiritual power and of finding internal sincerity and purity was the music of the Quran. The heavenly sound of the Quran, in only a short while, turned such wild people like those of the Arabian Peninsula into firm believers (*mumin*) who could grapple with the greatest powers of the age and overthrow them. Those Muslims viewed the Quran as being not only a book of lessons and instructions, but also as

nourishment for their souls and a means of strength and of increasing their faith (*iman*). Alone at night they would recite the Quran and intimately worship and supplicate to their God and, during the day, they would attack the enemy like roaring lions. The Quran had just such an expectation of those who had found their faith. Addressing itself to the Prophet it tells us:

"And do not follow the Kuffar (the disbelievers), and struggle against them with it (the Quran) strivingly, mightily." (25:52)

The Prophet was not to listen to the guile of his enemies nor submit on their terms, he was to stand against them and fight and struggle (*jihad*) against them with the weapon of the Quran, and be sure of being victorious. The story of the Prophet's life itself explains this verse. Alone with no support, he stood up with only the Quran in his hand, yet the Quran became everything for him. It provided soldiers for him, supplied him with arms, prepared his forces and, finally, it subdued his enemies. It drew individuals towards him from amongst the enemy and caused them to submit before its bringer, the Messenger of God. It is in this fashion, therefore, that it realises its divine and true responsibility.

When the Quran calls its language the language of the heart, it means the heart which it wants to give lustre to, purify and excite, with its signs. This language is not the language of sensual music that sometimes nourishes the human being's animal passions. Nor is it the language of military music and marches that are sung by armed forces and which enthuse and strengthen the qualities of courage and valour. It is the language that made valiant and spiritual defenders of rudimentary Bedouins, about whom it was truthfully said that they carried their knowledge, their vision, their clear thinking and their divine and spiritual perceptions on their swords, and used these swords in the path of these thoughts and ideas. For those Muslims, there were no private issues, no private interests. Though they were not perfect and were subject to mistakes, yet they were ever in contact with the depths of existence, engaged at night in prayer and during the day in *jihad*.^{[3](#)}

The Quran, with its own special characteristic of being a book of the heart and soul, is a book that stimulates the human being, causing tears to flow and hearts to tremble. This has been strongly emphasized, and is true even of the "People of the Book"^{[4](#)}:

"The People who received the Book before believe in it, and when it is recited for them they say: We believe that it is definitely the truth from our Lord." (28:53)

In another verse, it has been emphasized that amongst non-Muslims it is the Christians who are nearer to the Muslims than the Jews and polytheists. Then a group of Christians who believed and become Muslims on hearing the Quran are described in this way:

"And when they hear what has been revealed to the Prophet, you see their eyes flowing with tears for what they realise of the truth. They say: 'Our Lord, we have believed, so record us with those who are witnesses (of the Prophet).'" (5:83)

And, in another place, where fundamentally it is the believers who are spoken of, they are described like this:

"God has sent the best announcement; a book the parts of which are (all) similar. The skins of those who fear their Lord shudder from it, and then their skins and hearts become pliant to remembrance of God." (39:23)

In these verses and in many other verses, the Quran shows that it is not simply a book of knowledge and analysis, but that at the same time that it makes use of reason and logic, it also speaks to the feelings, emotions and subtleties of the human soul, thus subjecting the whole human being to its effect.

The Quran's Address

Another of the points that must be realised when reviewing the Quran analytically, is the discerning of the Quran's addressees. In the Quran, phrases like "guidance to the God-fearing (*mutaqqin*)", "Guidance and good-news to the believers", and "To warn the living", have occurred frequently. Here it could be said that those who are pious and cautious of God (*muttaqin*) do not need to be guided, because they are already pious and, therefore, guided. This question will be answered.

In another place in the Holy Quran we see that it describes itself thus:

"Truly it is a reminder to the (beings of the) worlds, and you will most definitely come to know about it after this."(38:87)[5](#)

So, a question: are the verses of this book for all the people of the world ,or are they only for the believers? Again, in another verse, God the Sublime addresses Himself to the Holy Prophet and says:

"We definitely sent you as a blessing for all the (beings of the) worlds." (21: 107)

A more detailed explanation of this subject will be presented when we discuss history in the Quran. For the moment, we must say briefly that where the Quran is addressed to all the people of the world, what it really means is that the Quran is not particular to any special group or people.

Whoever travels in the direction of the Quran will be saved. However, in the verses where the book has been mentioned as being for the guidance of the believers and God-fearing (*mumin* and *mottaqin*) it is intended to make the point clear that a certain type of people will finally be brought in the Quran's direction and that a certain kind of people will be put aside. The Quran does not mention any special nation or tribe as being its devotees. It does not say that it takes this side or that side.

Unlike the teachings of other schools, the Quran does not support the interests of a single class or party. It does not say, for example, that it has come to safeguard the interests of a certain class. It does not say that its sole aim is to support the working class or farm labourers. The Quran emphasizes about

itself that it is a book for the establishment of justice. About the Prophets it says:

"And We sent down with them the Book and the Balance, for mankind to establish justice."
(57:25)

The Quran wants justice for the whole of mankind, not simply for this class or that class, this nation or tribe or that one. Unlike some schools (fascism, for example), the Quran, in order to attract and maintain a following, does not fan the flames of bigotry and hatred. Similarly, in contrast to other schools (like Marxism), the Quran does not depend upon the human weaknesses of interest-seeking and enslavement to material motivations, nor motivate them by means of their material interests.⁶

The Quran, in the same way that it maintains a noble independence for the conscience of human reason, so it maintains a noble independence for the innate conscience of human nature. And it is on the basis of this truth and justice loving and seeking human nature (*fītrat*) that it places human beings firmly on the path of development and progress. It is for this reason that its message is not limited to the working class or farming class or the deprived and oppressed. The Quran addresses both the oppressor and the oppressed and calls them both to the path of right. The prophet Moses (a.s.) delivers God's message both to the tribe of Israel (*Bani Isra-il*) and to Pharaoh, and wants them both to believe in their Lord and move in His path. The Holy Prophet Muhammad (S) presents his call and message both to the nobles of the Quraysh and to the oppressed figures of Abu Thar and Ammar.

The Quran mentions numerous examples of individuals being provoked against themselves and then turning away from their misleading path of corruption and repenting. Of course, the Quran is aware of the point that the turning away and repentance (*tawbah*) of those who live in ease and comfort is by degrees more difficult than the turning away and repentance of the deprived and oppressed. The second group move in the path of justice by the law of nature, while the first group must overlook the material interests of themselves and their circle, and must trample their desires and wants.

The Quran says that those who believe in it are those whose souls are clean and purified. These believers have been drawn to it solely by the love and desire for truth and justice that is the innate nature of every human being, not by the ruling of their interests, by material desires and worldly allurements.

^{1.} Amr bil-ma'ruf wa nahyan al-munkar is the Islamic duty of enjoining to what is good and prohibiting from what is bad.
Translator's Note

^{2.} The Imams used to recite the Quran in this fashion, so that passers-by who heard their reciting could not help themselves but to stand, become deeply moved, and fall into tears.

^{3.} Also refer to Nahj ul-balagha, Sermon 191.

^{4.} The People of the Book are the Jews, Christians and, perhaps, Zoroastrians. Translator's Note

^{5.} This verse is one of the wonders of the Quran. When it was revealed, the Prophet was in Meccah and, in reality, was calling the people of a village to the truth. It seemed comic that an individual with such confidence should say that the news of this verse would be heard afterwards, and that they would soon know what this book was to do to the world.

^{6.} Because in this case justice for the believers would no longer be the goal, and the goal would simply be the meeting of their interests.

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