

Suratul Baqarah: Verses 208-210

(٢٠٨) يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا ادْخُلُوا فِي السِّلْمِ كَافَّةً وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا خُطُوَاتِ الشَّيْطَانِ ۚ إِنَّهُ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ مُبِينٌ

(٢٠٩) فَإِنْ زَلَلْتُمْ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَتْكُمْ الْبَيِّنَاتُ فَاَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ

(٢١٠) هَلْ يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَّا أَنْ يَأْتِيَهُمُ اللَّهُ فِي ظُلَلٍ مِنَ الْعَمَامِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةِ وَقُضِيَ الْأَمْرُ ۚ وَإِلَى اللَّهِ تُرْجَعُ الْأُمُورُ

O you who believe! Enter you one and all into submission wholly and do not follow the footsteps of Satan; surely he is to you an open enemy. (208)

But if you slip after clear signs have come to you, then know that Allah is Mighty, Wise. (209)

Do they await aught but that Allah should come to them in the canopies of bright cloud and the angels; and the matter is decreed away; and all matters are returned to Allah. (210)

Commentary

These three verses, together with the four that follow them, guide us as how to preserve religious unity in human society: To enter into total submission, to limit oneself to the word spoken by Allah and to that deed whose path is shown by Allah.

They declare that religious unity was never disintegrated, nor was the happiness of both worlds turned into misery with disaster visited upon the territory of a people, except when they left submission, manipulated the signs of Allah by altering them and putting them into the wrong place.

This had happened to the children of Israel and other people, and will surely happen to this *ummah* also. But in the end Allah promises them His help,

Surely the help of Allah is near.

Qur'an: O you who believe! Enter you one and all into submission wholly:

slim (submission, السَّلْم), *islam* (الاسلام) and *taslim* (التَّسْلِيم) all are the same. *Kaffatan* (كافة) is for emphasis and means 'all', 'wholly'.

As the verse is addressed to the believers, and they are ordered to enter into submission "wholly" the command covers the whole group as well as every individual.

It is obligatory on each and every believer, as it is on the whole of Muslim society not to contravene this command and to submit all matters to Allah and His Apostle. Hence the phrase ***one and all*** in the translation.

Again, as the hearers are already believers the submission called for means total submission to Allah after believing in Him. Hence the word ***wholly*** in the translation.

It follows that the believers must submit all their affairs to Allah, they should not decide themselves what was good for them and what was not, they should not prepare or select any path for themselves without the guidance of Allah and His Apostle.

They must remember that no people were destroyed except that they followed their own views and desires, and talked without true knowledge; and no people forfeited the right of life and happiness except that they became disunited.

It is clear from the above that following the footsteps of Satan does not mean following him in all the falsehood which he invites to, because a believer cannot follow Satan in all satanic schemes.

Rather, it means to follow him in the matters of religion. Satan furnishes some paths of untruth with the signposts of truth; in this way, he puts into religion what is not from religion. Thus, a believer is deceived into following that path without realizing his error.

One way of becoming aware of such an interpolation is to find out whether Allah and His Apostle have ever mentioned it in their teachings of the religion.

The context and words of the verses also show what has been explained above. "Footsteps" are found in a trodden path. The believer is proceeding on that path; therefore, it must be the path of true religion.

But Satan has put his marks thereon. So, the ***footsteps of Satan*** should refer to Satanic ways within the highway of true faith. The believer is obliged to enter into submission.

Therefore, wherever he proceeds without wholly submitting himself to Allah and His Apostle, it must be in the footsteps of Satan; if he goes on to that path, he is following Satan's footsteps.

This verse is similar to some others. For example:

O men! Eat of what is in the earth lawful and good, and do not follow the footsteps of Satan; surely he is to you an open enemy. He only enjoins you evil and indecency, and that you should say against Allah what you do not know (2:168—169);

O you who believe! Do not follow the footsteps of Satan; and whoever follows the footsteps of Satan, then surely he enjoins indecency and evil. (24:21);

Eat of what Allah has given you and do not follow the footsteps of Satan, then surely he enjoins indecency and evil. (24:21);

Eat of what Allah has given you and do not follow the footsteps of Satan; surely he is your open enemy. (6:142).

The difference between the verse under discussion and those quoted above is that this verse addresses the group as a whole, as it contains the word *kaffatan* (all, wholly, كَافَّةً); but those other verses are general.

Accordingly, this verse implies the same meaning as the verses,

And hold fast by the cord of Allah all together and be not divided. (3:103);

And surely this My path is straight one, so follow it; and do not follow the (other) ways, for they will scatter you from His path. (6:153).

The verse implies that Islam guarantees that it contains all kind of laws and knowledge which are needed by the human beings for their welfare and good.

Qur'an: But if you slip ... Mighty, Wise:

zallah (الزَّلَّة) means a slip, a falling. The verse says: If you did not enter one and all into submission, wholly and slipped – and the slip refers to following the footsteps of Satan – then know that Allah is Mighty, Who is not prevailed upon in His orders, and Wise, Who decides in your affairs according to His Wisdom.

Thus He shall decide about you according to His Wisdom and shall enforce it upon you and nobody will be able to hinder it.

Qur'an: Do they await aught but that Allah should come to them in the canopies of bright cloud and the angels:

zulal (الظُّلُل) is plural of *zullah* (الظَّلَّة) which means “anything used for shade”, like canopy, awning, or tent.

Apparently, the word “angels” is in conjunction with the divine name “Allah”.

The preceding two verses were addressed to the believers (in the second person). This one dramatically changes it to third person and starts addressing the Apostle of Allah; implying that those who slip up and follow the footsteps of Satan are not worthy of direct address from Allah.

It appears as though they are awaiting a decree by their following the footsteps of Satan and by their disunity and division.

And that decree should be that Allah and the angels come unto them in canopies of cloud, and the matter be decided while they are still unaware of it, or without having any pity on them and on their plight; all matters are returned to Allah; there is no escape from His judgement and decree.

The context shows that ***Do they await aught ...*** is the description of the threat implied in the previous sentence, ***then know that Allah is Mighty, Wise.***

It is self-evident truth, which is also proved by the Qur’an and the *sunnah*, that attributes of the body cannot be used for Allah, nor can He be described with adjectives of transient things.

No such word, phrase or sentence can be used for Him that implies transience, need, deficiency or want. Allah says:

Nothing whatsoever (is there) like the like of Him. (42:11);

and Allah is He Who is Self-sufficient (35:15);

Allah is the Creator of everything (39:62).

There are numerous such verses, and all of them are confirmed and decisive ones to which the ambiguous verses should be referred. It is these confirmed verses which guide us towards the correct interpretation of the ambiguous ones.

If any verse apparently attributes to Allah, an action or a characteristic of transient things, then it must be referred to the confirmed verses and interpreted in a way which is not below His dignity nor opposed to His beautiful names.

Now here is a verse which attributes the action of “coming” to Allah. A few other verses also have used this word for Him.

And comes your Lord with the angels arrayed in ranks (89:22);

then came upon them Allah from whence they did not expect (59:2);

so Allah came upon their structure from the foundations (16:26).

In all such verses, it is necessary to interpret them with such meanings which are worthy of Divine sublimity. We may give them the meaning of, let us say, sending His chastisement upon them, surrounding them with His power or wrath.

Accordingly, the meaning of **Allah should come to them** in this verse shall be “Allah should surround them with His power for enforcing His decree on them”.

Further, whenever Allah is pleased to show that the apparent means and the intermediate causes are not independent of the order of Allah, He discards attributing the action to such causes and means; instead He attributes it to Himself or to His order.

He says in one place:

Allah takes the souls at the time of their death (39:42);

while in other places He attributes this action to the angel of death or the angels;

Say, the angel of death ... shall cause you to die (32:11);

Until when death comes to one of you, Our messengers (i.e. angels) take him away (6:61).

To make it more clear, look how He has declared about the angels that:

only according to His command do they act (21:27).

Likewise, He says,

Surely your Lord will judge between them (10:93),

and

when the order of Allah came, judgement was given with truth (40:78).

And the same is the case with the verse under discussion

(Do they await aught but that Allah should come to them in the canopies of bright cloud and the angels)

and the verse

Do they await aught but that the angels should come to them or that the order of your Lord should come (16:33).

The above verse proves that the verse under discussion, **Allah should come**, also means “the order of Allah should come”.

Likewise, in every place where the action attributed to Allah is below His power and dignity, we may safely say that the word 'order' or 'command' is implied, as the above verses have shown.

This explanation has been accepted by the majority of the commentators of the Qur'an and it is correct. But there is even a deeper and finer meaning which can be understood if one ponders on the Qur'an.

A characteristic which is accompanied by a deficiency, want or imperfection is not attributable to Allah.

But if that characteristic could be separated from that deficiency, want or imperfection, then there is no reason why it cannot be attributed to Allah, provided it is suitable for His sublimity and perfection.

The word "coming" creates in our mind a picture of a body gradually moving and shortening the distance between itself and another body till it reaches quite near to that.

If we can remove the material characteristics from this meaning, there will remain the idea of "nearness", with the disappearance of any obstruction in between.

In that case, it would be quite correct to use this word for Allah literally, not metaphorically. Accordingly, **Allah should come to them** would mean that there would remain no curtain between His creatures and His judgement about them.

Anyhow, this verse contains the threat which was implied in the preceding sentence, **then know that Allah is Mighty, Wise.**

This threat may be about the chastisement awaiting them in the Hereafter, as it is in the similar verse:

Do they await aught but that the angels should come to them or that the order of your Lord should come (16:33),

which, as its context shows, is clearly about the events of the Hereafter.

Or, it may be about something expected to happen in this world, as may be seen in the verses of s^{ur}ah Y^{un}us:

so when their apostle came, the matter was decided with justice, and they shall not be dealt with unjustly. And they say, 'when this promise will come to pass, if you are truthful ...' Say, Do you see if His chastisement overtakes you by night or by day, what is there of it that the guilty hasten for? (10:47-50).

The same is the implication of the verses, 30:30-36, and the verse,

How many a town, which was unjust, We did destroy and We raised another people after it? (21:11).

The chastisement of this world is because this world is a foretaste of the life Hereafter, where every aspect of this world would appear more perfectly and completely.

And it is possible that the promised punishment would be in both worlds together.

In any case, the words, ***in the canopies of bright cloud*** would be interpreted according to the place where the promised punishment would be meted out.

Qur'an: *and the matter is decreed away; and all matters are returned to Allah:*

The matter is decreed away by Allah, but His name is not mentioned to show His Greatness. There are many examples of such deletions in the Qur'an.

Traditions

Many traditions have been written concerning verse 2: 168

(O men! Eat the lawful and good things out of what is in the earth; and do not follow the footsteps of Satan ...)

which support the meaning given by us of *following the footsteps of Satan*.

Some traditions say that “submission” means the love and obedience of the Prophet and his progeny (*wilayah*, *الولاية*). Such traditions give an example of a general meaning.

There is a tradition from ar-Ridha (a.s.) about the words of Allah,

Do they await aught but that Allah should come to them in the canopies of bright cloud and the angels:

He said: “Allah says: ‘Do they wait aught but that Allah should come to them with the angels in the canopies of bright clouds’; like this it was revealed.” And he said, about the word of Allah;

And comes your Lord with the angels arranged in ranks (89:22),

that : “Surely, Allah cannot be described with attributes of coming and going. Elevated is He from transferring from one place to another. Verily, it means, ‘And comes the command of your Lord with the angels arranged in ranks’.” [*at-Tawhid* and *Ma'ani al-akhbar*]

The author says: The words of the Imam at the beginning of the interpretation, “Allah says”, do not mean the actual word or recitation of the verse.

The word “says” here stands for “means”. The interpretation given in this tradition is the same which we have already explained, that “coming of Allah” means coming of His command.

The Angels do whatever they do, and come down whenever they come down, by the command of Allah. He says about angels:

Nay! They are honoured servants; they do not precede Him in speech and (only) according to His commandment do they act. (21:27),

and

He sends down the angels with the spirit by His commandment (16:2).

The verse begins with an interrogation which here stands for denial and disapproval. It means that “they do not await” or “they should not await”.

But some people have said that this denial and disapproval is comprehensive and refutes not only their awaiting but even the thing awaited.

In other words, it means that they do not await aught but an impossible thing — that Allah should come to them in the canopies of cloud as one body comes to another body, and that the angels should come with Him and He should order them and forbid them.

Obviously such a thing is impossible; and the aim of the verse would be to hint that these people cannot mend their ways by these exhortations and sermons.

But this meaning does not agree with the context of the verse. It has been explained that all these verses have one context. Therefore, this verse also is about the condition of the believers.

And the believers cannot be condemned in the suggested manner. Apart from that if Allah had meant to show that the thing awaited was impossible or beneath His sublimity, He would have followed it with some words to show that it was so.

And we find that it is the custom of the Qur’an everywhere on such occasions. For example:

And those who do not hope of our meeting say: “Why have not angels been sent down upon us, or (why) do we not see our Lord?” Certainly they think too high of themselves and have revolted (in) a great revolt. (25:21);

And they say: “The Beneficent (God) has taken to Himself a son!” Glory be to Him! (21:26).

Apart from that, what would be, in this case, the significance of the words, ***in the canopies of bright cloud?*** And what would the subsequent words mean?

Other Traditions

This last verse has variously been interpreted in the traditions of the Imams of *Ahlu'l-bayt* as referring to the Day of Resurrection (al-'Ayyashi from al-Baqir — a.s.) or the Day of Return (the *raj'ah*, [1](#) الرَّجْعَة) (as-Sadiq from as-Sadiq — a.s.) or the Reappearance of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) (al-'Ayyashi from al-Baqir [a.s.] with two chains.)

And there are many such cases where a verse has been interpreted by them as referring to the Day of Resurrection in one tradition, and to the Day of Return in another, and to the Reappearance of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) in yet another one.

It is because all these meanings are inter-related, so much so that they can be said to be basically one. As the people have not gone deep into the subject of the Resurrection and have not looked into it in the light of the Qur'an they have gone their separate ways about these traditions.

Some have discarded them altogether, even though there are probably more than five hundred traditions on its various aspects; some have interpreted them according to their own views even though the wordings of the traditions are very clear and explicit.

A third group quotes these traditions and refrains from giving any opinion – these people are the most reasonable of all.

The non-Shi'ah Muslims believe that Imam al-Mahdi will appear; they have narrated *mutawatir* traditions about it from the Prophet, but they reject the idea of the *raj'ah* and say that this belief is a peculiarity of the Shi'ahs.

And in these days some people, claiming to be Shi'ah, also have rejected this belief, saying that it has been foisted into Shi'ism by the Jews and some nominal Muslims like 'Abdullah ibn Saba' [2](#) and his companions. One of them tried to refute this belief by intellectual argument, the gist of which is as follows:

“It is a special grace of Allah that a living person is not given death until he reaches the perfection of the life and all his potentialities are converted into achievements.

If after death he is again sent back to this world it would be retrogression, a backward step from accomplishment to potentiality, and it is impossible, except when a truthful informer tells us about it, i.e., Allah or any of His Representatives, as He has informed us concerning the events of Mūsa, 'Isa, Ibrahim (peace be on them all) and others.

But we have not been told by Him or them anything about *ar-raj'ah*. And the evidence put by the believers in *ar-raj'ah* is not complete.”

After saying this he went on to claim about each and every tradition that it was weak — without knowing the difference between the correct ones and the defective ones.

The poor man did not realize that this argument is not a rational one at all. Its first part refutes its second part. If some thing is impossible by nature it would remain impossible without any exception.

An “impossible” idea would not be turned into “possible” just because a truthful informer said so. Anybody who said about an impossibility that it became a possibility, would not be “truthful”.

And if he was supposed to be really truthful then that thing would not have been an impossibility in the first place. Would we say that he was truthful if he were to say that one is not a half of two, or that a truthful person was at the same time a liar?

This much about the consistency of his argument.

Now, we come to his argument that (1) All people die when they reach the perfection of the life, and when their potentialities are converted into achievements; (2) What has attained achievement cannot be turned back to potentiality; (3) Therefore, a dead man cannot be returned to this life.

In this argument, the second premise is correct; the first is not. It is not “all” people, but only “some”, who die after attaining perfection and converting their potentialities into achievements.

A man, who completes his natural span of life and dies from old age, may be said to have reached the last stage of his perfection. But what about another man who prematurely dies of an epidemic or fatal sickness, or is killed?

Can it be claimed that he had already reached the last stage of his potential perfection? The answer is ‘No’. Therefore, it cannot be said that it is impossible for such persons to be returned to the life of this world.

Now it is obvious that his argument is neither comprehensive nor correct. We can think of many cases where it might be possible for a dead person (even if he had died after attaining his perfection) to be sent back to this world; for example, a man in his first life had a potential for a perfection which was not available at that time; he died; then by the progress of society, that perfectness became possible.

What is there to prevent his return to this world to achieve that perfection for which he had a potential in the first life? Because it will not be a step backward from perfection to potentiality; it will be progress from potential to perfection.

There are other examples, but this is not the place to go into the details of this subject.

As regards his argument against individual traditions, it has two serious defects:

(1) These traditions are *mutawatir*, in their meaning, from the Imams of *Ahlu 'l-bayt* — so much so that

non-Shi'ite Muslims have counted the belief of *ar-raj'ah*, from the very early days of Islam, as one of the special beliefs of the Shi'ah and their Imams – and a *mutawatir* matter cannot be refuted even if the individual traditions be really defective, or weak, or arguable.

(2) There are many verses revealed on this subject and many traditions which are complete in their meaning and reliable in their chains. We shall mention them when we come to the relevant verses like:

And on the day when We will gather from every people a party from among those who rejected Our signs, then they shall be formed into groups (27:83).

There are other verses to prove this belief.

Apart from these specific verses, there are others which imply this meaning. For example, the words of Allah which come shortly after the verse under discussion:

Or do you think that you will enter the Garden while yet has not come upon the like of which came upon those who have passed before you (2:214).

And one of the things which came upon previous nations was that some of their dead were resurrected, and lived again in this world, as the Qur'an narrates concerning the stories of Ibrahim, M^usa, 'Isa, 'Uzayr, Armia and others.

And the Messenger of Allah has said: "By Him in Whose hand is my soul! Most certainly you shall follow the traditions of those who were before you, as in a pair of shoes the one tallies with the other, and as one flea looks like another, until you will not miss their path, nor will they miss yours; (and this means) the traditions of the Israelites."

Moreover, these matters are among the reports of the great events of the latter days, foretold by the Imams of *Ahlu 'l-bayt*; these prophecies were preserved by reporters and narrators in books which were written and copied centuries before the events; and every day we see some of its parts fulfilled in exactly the same way without any addition or subtraction.

This compels us to believe that the remaining part of those prophecies (including *ar-raj'ah*) must be true.

Now we come back to the topic in hand. We were discussing why a single verse is sometimes explained as referring to the Day of Resurrection and sometimes as describing *ar-raj'ah* or the re-appearance of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.).

It appears from the characteristics and details of the Day of Resurrection, mentioned in the Qur'an, that it will be a day when no intermediate cause will hinder one from the signs of Allah; there will remain no veil on the face of truth.

All illusions will vanish and the signs of Allah will appear in their perfect manifestation.

That day could exist side by side with this world, but it is obvious from the Qur'an and *sunnah* that human beings, i.e., this species of homo sapiens who are descended from Adam and his wife, will become extinct in this world and only then will this great day dawn upon them.

The life of this world and the life of the Resurrection can exist side by side for different groups and species. The life of the period between death and the Day of Resurrection (*barzakh*, البرزخ) exists for our dead side by side with our life on this earth; neither does our life interfere with theirs, nor theirs with ours.

Allah says:

By Allah! Most certainly We sent (apostles) to nations before you, but Satan made their deeds fair seeming to them; so he is their guardian today and for them is a painful punishment (16:63).

This, therefore, is the reality of the Day of Resurrection, “the Day on which men shall stand before the Lord of the worlds” “the Day when they shall come forth; nothing concerning them remains hidden from Allah”.

That is why sometimes even death is called Resurrection, because the veil of intermediate causes is lifted from the imagination of the dead person. ‘Ali (a.s.) has said: “Whoever dies his resurrection begins.” This subject will be explained, God willing in its appropriate place.

The traditions which prove *ar-raj‘ah* in spite of their large number, are one in their essence.

They show that the world is proceeding towards a day when the signs of Allah will appear in their perfect manifestation; man will not disobey Allah, but shall worship Him with a sincere and pure heart, untainted by the desires of this world; and he will not be deceived by Satan.

At that time some dead persons — some friends of Allah and some of His enemies — shall be returned to the world again, and the truth will be separated from the falsehood.

It appears from above that the Day of Return shall be one of the stages of the Day of Resurrection. But it will be a lesser manifestation, because there shall remain, at that time, the possibility, to a certain extent, of evil and mischief, which will be impossible on the Day of Resurrection.

And that is the reason why in some traditions the same verses have been said to be related concerning the re-appearance of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.). It is because at his re-appearance also the truth will be manifested perfectly, though it will be less than on the Day of “Return”.

There are traditions narrated from the Imams of *Ahlu ‘l-bayt* that “The days of Allah are three: the Day of re-appearance, and the Day of Return, and the Day of Resurrection.”

Some of them say that “The days of Allah are three: the Day of Death, and the Day of Return, and the Day of Resurrection.”

The three days are one in their nature but different in degrees. It is because of this oneness of essence that a single verse is at different times interpreted by all three days.

The above discussion clearly shows that the Day of Return is not only possible, but a reality; and those who reject it have no reason to refute it.

1. ar Raj'ah (return) means that after the re-appearance of Imām al-Mahd (a.s.) and before the Day of Judgement some confirmed friends of Allāh and some of His confirmed enemies shall be returned to this world again to live under the rule of the Representative of Allāh.

2. 'Abdullāh ibn Sab' is a mythical personality, who did not exist outside the imagination of some story-tellers. See 'Abdullāh ibn Sab' wa as-takhr (عبد الله ابن سبا) by as-Sayyid Murtad al-'Askar of Tehran.

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