

[Home](#) > [Understanding the Uniqueness of the Quran](#) > [The Three Distinguishing Characteristics of the Qur'an](#) > Is the Qur'an Understandable?

The Three Distinguishing Characteristics of the Qur'an

Our study of the Qur'an acquaints us with three distinguishing characteristics of this holy book. The first distinguishing characteristic is the absolute authenticity of its source. That is, without the slightest need of any comparison between the oldest manuscripts, it is evident that what we recite as the verses of the Holy Qur'an, are exactly the same words presented before the world by Muhammad ibn 'Abd-Allah (S).

The second characteristic feature of the Qur'an is the quality of its contents: its teachings are genuinely original and have not been adopted or plagiarized. It is the duty of an analytical study to prove this fact.

The third characteristic of the Qur'an is its Divine identity: its teachings have been delivered to the Prophet from a world that transcends his thought and mind. The Prophet (S) was only a recipient of this revelation and message. This is the result that we obtain from the study of the sources and roots of the Qur'an.

But the study of the sources of the Qur'an, and confirmation of its originality, depend upon the analytical study. So I resolve to open this discussion with the analytical study of the Qur'an. We shall first see what is the subject matter of the Qur'an, what kind of problems are discussed in it, what type of problems have been given priority, and in what manner those subjects are presented in it.

If we are successful in our critical analysis, and acquire a sufficient understanding of the Qur'anic teachings, it will bring us to an acknowledgment of its principal aspect, which is the Divine aspect of the Qur'an, the quality of its being a Divine miracle.

Conditions Necessary for the Study of the Qur'an

The understanding of the Qur'an requires certain preliminaries which are briefly described here. The first essential condition necessary for the study of the Qur'an, is the knowledge of the Arabic language, such as for the understanding of Hafiz and Sa'di, it is impossible to get anywhere without the knowledge of the

Persian language. In the same way, to acquaint oneself with the Qur'an without knowing the Arabic language is impossible.

The other essential condition is the knowledge of the history of Islam; since, unlike the Bible and the Torah, this book was revealed gradually during a long period of twenty-three years of the Prophet's life, a tumultuous time in the history of Islam. It is on this account that every verse of the Qur'an is related to certain specific historical incident called sha'n-i nuzul. The sha'n-i nuzul, by itself does not restrict the meaning of the verses, but the knowledge of the particulars of revelation throws more light on the subject of the verses in an effective way.

The third condition essential for the understanding of the Qur'an, is the correct knowledge of the sayings of the Prophet (S). He was, according to the Qur'an itself, the interpreter of the Qur'an par excellence. The Qur'an says:

وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الذِّكْرَ لِتُبَيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ مَا نُزِّلَ إِلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

“We have revealed to you the Reminder that you may make clear to men what has been revealed to them ... “ (16:44)

The Qur'an also says:

هُوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي الْأُمِّيِّينَ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَإِنْ كَانُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُبِينٍ

“It is He who has sent among the illiterate a Messenger from among them, to recite His sings to them, and to purify them and to teach them the Book and the Wisdom. “ (62:2)

According to the Qur'an, the Prophet (S) himself is the exegetist and the interpreter of the Qur'anic text. Whatever has reached us from the Prophet, is of great help in our understanding of the Qur'an. For the Shi'ah, who believe in the infallible Imams (A) also, and believe that the Prophet (S) has transmitted everything he obtained from God to his spiritual successors (awliya'), those genuine riwayat (narrations about the Prophet (S)) that have reached us through the Imams, possess the same degree of authenticity as those obtained directly from the Prophet (S). Accordingly, the authentic riwayat of the Imams are of great help to us in our understanding of the Qur'an.

A very important point to remember during the initial stages of study, is that we should try to understand the Qur'an with the help of the Qur'an itself; because, the verses of the Qur'an constitute a completely united integral whole, a coherent unified structure. If we single out any verse from the Qur'an and try to understand it in isolation from the rest of the Book, it would not be a correct method.

However, it is possible that we may happen to understand it, but the method is not recommended by caution, as certain verses of the Qur'an are explanatory for certain other verses. All great commentators of the Qur'an have affirmed this method; the infallible Imams also had approved of this manner of interpretation of the Qur'anic verses.

The Qur'an has its own specific mode of discussing various problems. There are instances where if a solitary verse is studied without placing it in its proper context, it gives quite a different sense than when it is seen under the light of the verses dealing with a similar subject.

For instance, the specific mode and style of the Qur'an may be noticed from the distinction drawn between al-ayat al-muhkamat (the firm verses) and al-ayat al-mutashabihat (the ambiguous verses). There is a prevalent view regarding the muhkamat and the mutashabihat. Some people imagine that al-ayat al-muhkamat are such verses as whose meaning is quite simple and clear, whereas the meaning of al-ayat al-mutashabihat is cryptic, enigmatic and puzzling. According to this notion, men are only permitted to cogitate upon the meaning of al-ayat al-muhkamat, and al-ayat al-mutashabihat are basically inscrutable and beyond their understanding.

Here, the question arises, what is the philosophy underlying al-ayat al-mutashabihat? Why has the Qur'an put forward such verses that are incomprehensible? A brief answer to this question is that neither muhkam means "simple" and "clear", nor mutashabih means "ambiguous", "cryptic" and "enigmatic." "Ambiguous" and "enigmatic" are adjectives applicable to sentences that do not convey the meaning in a direct and simple manner, as are sometimes met in the writings of various authors.

For example, when Sultan Mahmud rewarded the poetic efforts of Ferdowsi with a reward of an insignificant and humiliating amount of money, Ferdowsi did not accept it, and instead he accused Sultan Mahmud of the trait of parsimony in his versified lampoons. Some of them were quite clear and obvious whereas the others were not devoid of ambiguity and a lot of enigma. Ferdowsi is quite direct when he says:

Had the king's mother been an honourable lady,

He would have rewarded me with knee-high gold and silver.

However, when he remarks:

The palm of king Mahmud, the conqueror of lands,

Was nine times nine and three times four,

what does he intend to say? Here Ferdowsi has made use of an enigmatic technique. Those who are interested would like to know the solution: $9 \times 9 = 81$, $3 \times 4 = 12$, and 81 plus 12 add up to 93. Ferdowsi says, the Sultan's palm was just like 93. It means that the fist of the Sultan was so tightly closed that only his thumb was free, and this thumb along with the index finger (which acquires the shape of 92 and other

three fingers make 93. Through this obscure statement Ferdowsi wants to emphatically report the miserliness of the Sultan.

We shall see whether there are actually any enigmatic and abstruse verses in the Qur'an. Such an assumption contradicts with the text of the Qur'an which unequivocally states that it is a clear and comprehensible book whose verses provide guidance and shed light. The core of the problem is that some of the issues dealt with in the Qur'an are related to metaphysical matters and the transcendental world, which cannot be expressed in ordinary language. In the words of Shaykh Shabistari:

The word fails to encompass meaning,

The ocean cannot be poured into a pot.

Since the language of the Qur'an is the same as used by men, inevitably, the same diction is used for the most sublime and spiritual themes as we human beings use for earthly subjects. But in order to prevent any misunderstanding about certain problems, some verses have been devised in such a way that they need to be explained with the help of other verses. There is no way except this. For example, the Qur'an wanted to point out to a truth namely, seeing God through the heart; that is, to witness the presence of God by means of one's heart. This idea has been expressed in the following terms:

وَجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ نَاضِرَةٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهَا نَاطِرَةٌ

(Some) faces on the Day shall be bright, looking towards their Lord. (75:22-23)

Uniqueness of the Qur'an

The Qur'an makes use of the verb "looking," and no other word more suitable could be available for the expression of the desired sense. But to avert the possibility of any doubt, the Qur'an explains in other place:

Vision perceives Him not, and He perceives all vision. (6: 104)

The second verse makes the reader distinguish between two different meanings conveyed by the same word. In order to avoid any possibility of ambiguity in its exalted themes, the Qur'an asks us to check the mutashabihat against the mahkamat:

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ

He sent down upon thee the Book, wherein are verses firm (ayat mahkamat) that are the essence of the Book. (3:6)

Thereby, the Qur'an means that there are certain verses whose firmness cannot be denied and other meanings cannot be derived from them, except their real ones. Such verses are the 'mother' of the Book (umm al-kitab). In the same way as a mother is the refuge to her child, or a cosmopolitan city (umm al-qura) is the center of small cities, al-ayat al-muhkamat are also regarded as the axes of the mutashabihat.

Al-ayat al-mutashabihat are, of course, to be cogitated upon and understood, but they are to be pondered upon with the help of al-ayat al-muhkamat. Any inference drawn without the help of the mother-verses would not be correct and reliable.

Is the Qur'an Understandable?

During the analysis and study of the Qur'an, the first question that arises is whether the Qur'an can be studied and understood. Has this book been introduced for the purpose of studying and understanding it, or whether it is just for reading and reciting and obtaining reward and blessing?

The reader, possibly, may wonder at raising of such a question. To him it may appear beyond doubt that the Qur'an is meant for the purpose of knowing and understanding it. Nevertheless, in view of various undesirable currents, which due to numerous reasons came into existence in the Muslim world regarding the question of understanding of the Qur'an, and which had an important role in bringing about the decline of Muslims, we shall discuss this matter in brief.

Regrettably, the roots of those degenerate and dangerous notions still persist in our societies. So I consider it necessary to elaborate on this topic.

Among the Shi'ah scholars of three or four centuries ago, there appeared a group which believed that the Qur'an is not a hujjah ("proof", meaning a legal source usable for vindication). Among the four sources of *fiqh* that have been regarded as the criteria and standard for the understanding of the Islamic problems by Muslim scholars, i.e. the Qur'an, the *sunnah* (tradition), '*aql* (reason) and *ijma'* (consensus of opinion), they did not recognize three of them. Regarding *ijma'*, they said that it belongs to the Sunni tradition and they could not follow it.

Concerning reason, they maintained that reason can also err, and reliance on reason is not legitimate. About the Qur'an they respectfully asserted that the Qur'an is greater in station than being subject to study and comprehension by us humble human creatures. It is only the privilege of the Prophet and the Imams to ponder over the verses of the Holy Qur'an. We ordinary human beings have only the right to read and recite them. This group was that of the Akhbaryun or Akhbaris.

The Akhbaris regarded hadith and chronicles as the only permissible sources of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). One may be astounded to learn that in some of the Qur'anic exegeses written by these people, they mentioned only those verses about which the tradition existed, and refrained from

mentioning other verses as if they are not a part of the Qur'an.

Such a kind of practice was an injustice to the Qur'an. This shows that a society that could neglect and alienate their own heavenly book and that too of the standard and stature of the Qur'an, is not at all up to the Qur'anic standards. Besides the Akhbaris there were other groups who also regarded the Qur'an as inaccessible to the ordinary human intellect. Among them the Ash'arites can be named, who believed that the knowledge of the Qur'an does not necessarily mean that its verses should be pondered over, but the real meanings are the same as that the words literally communicate.

According to them, whatever we understand from the outward meaning, we have to be satisfied with it. We should not be concerned with the secret and inner meanings. It was quite natural that this sort of thinking regarding the Qur'an, very rapidly, gave rise to serious deviations and grave misunderstandings. Since they were forced on the one hand to the task of interpretation of the meaning of the Qur'anic verses, and, on the other hand, banished reason also from the realm of religious learning, as a result, they were forced to adopt merely vulgar and superficial interpretations of the Qur'anic verses.

On account of their faulty way of thinking, they deviated from the regular course of correct thinking, and thus gave way to distorted and faulty religious vision. As the result of this type of religious thinking, heretical beliefs like the personification of God the Almighty, and numerous other distorted ideas like the possibility of visual perception of God, His possession of physical characteristics etc., came into existence.

Opposing the group which abandoned the Qur'an, another group came into existence which used the Qur'an as the means to fulfill their selfish aims. They gave the Qur'anic verses such interpretations as were favourable to their selfish interests, and wrongfully attributed certain ideas to the Qur'anic text that were not at all in agreement with the spirit of the Qur'an.

In answer to every objection that was made against them, they said that none except themselves could understand the esoteric and secret meaning of the Qur'anic verses, and whatever they stated was based on the understanding and knowledge of the esoteric meaning of the verses.

The champions of this movement in the history of Islam consist of two groups: the first group are the Isma'ilis, who are also known as the Batinis (secret sect), and the other are the Sufis. Most of the Isma'ilis are found in India and some of them are in Iran. They had formed an empire in Egypt known as the Fatimid caliphate. The Isma'ilis are so-called Shi'ahs who believe in six Imams.

But all the Twelver Imami Shi'ah scholars are unanimous in the opinion that in spite of their belief in six Imams, the Isma'ilis stand at a greater distance from the Shi'ite faith than the non-Shi'ite sects. The Sunnis, who do not believe in any of the Imams in the same sense as the Shi'ah do, nevertheless are nearer to the Shi'ah than these "Six-Imami Shi'ahs."

The Isma'ilis, on account of their batini beliefs and secretive practices have played a treacherous role in

the history of Islam and have had a big hand in causing serious deviations in the realm of Islam.

Besides the Isma'ilis, the Sufis are also charged with distortion of the Qur'anic verses and had a long hand in interpreting them according to their personal beliefs. Here I present a specimen of their exegesis so that the extent and method of their misinterpretation may be known:

The anecdote of Ibrahim (A) and his son Isma'il is described by the Qur'an as follows: It occurred to Ibrahim (A) in his dream that he has to sacrifice his son for the sake of God. At first he is perplexed regarding such an instruction; but as he repeatedly has the dream reiterating the same theme, he becomes certain of the Will of God and decides to obey the Divine command. He puts the whole matter before his son, who also faithfully accepts his father's proposal of executing the Divine command:

يَا بُنَيَّ إِنِّي أَرَىٰ فِي الْمَنَامِ أَنِّي أَذْبَحُكَ فَانْظُرْ مَاذَا تَرَىٰ ﴿٩٠﴾ قَالَ يَا أَبَتِ افْعَلْ مَا تُؤْمَرُ ﴿٩١﴾ سَتَجِدُنِي إِن شَاءَ اللَّهُ مِنَ الصَّابِرِينَ

“My son, I see in a dream that I shall sacrifice thee; consider what thinkest thou?” He said, “My father, do as thou art bidden; thou shalt find me, God willing, one of the steadfast.” (37: 102)

Here the aim is the expression of total submission and resignation towards the Divine decree. For the same reason the father and son are ready to execute the Divine command with whole-hearted purity and sincerity, but the execution of the command was stopped by the Will of God. But the same incident is interpreted by the Sufis in this fashion: Ibrahim here represents intellect and reason ('aql) and Isma'il represents the self (nafs); the Qur'anic anecdote is an allegory that hints at the attempt of reason to murder the human self (nafs).

It is obvious that such interpretation of the Qur'an is like wanton treatment of it, and presents a distorted perspective of its teachings. It is in the context of such deviate interpretations of the Qur'an based upon personal or sectarian bias and interests that the Prophet has said: One who interprets the Qur'an according to his wish, should be certain of his place in hell.

This kind of frivolous attitude towards the verses of the Qur'an amounts to the betrayal of the Qur'an and that too of a grievous degree. The Qur'an itself strikes a middle course between the stagnant and narrow-minded attitude of the Akhbaris and the unwarranted and deviate interpretations of the Batinis. It recommends a course of sincere, disinterested study and asks for unbiased and unprejudiced meditation over its meanings. Not only the believers and the faithful, but even the infidels are invited by it to contemplate over its verses.

The Qur'an demands that its verses should be first contemplated over, before forming any adverse opinion against them. Addressing the opponents, it says, why they don't ponder over the Qur'an, what sort of hearts they possess, they are as if shut close and sealed:

أَفَلَا يَتَذَكَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ أَمْ عَلَى قُلُوبٍ أَقْفَالُهَا

“What, do they not ponder the Qur'an? Or is it that there are locks upon their hearts? “(47:24)

The Qur'an also says in one of its verses:

كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ مُبَارَكٌ لِيَدَّبَّرُوا آيَاتِهِ وَلِيَتَذَكَّرَ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

(This is) a Book We have revealed to you abounding in good, that they may ponder the verses. (38:29)

That is, We have not sent the Qur'an to be kissed, embraced and put on the niche to gather dust, but for men to read and to contemplate about its contents:

لِيَدَّبَّرُوا آيَاتِهِ وَلِيَتَذَكَّرَ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

“That those endowed with understanding may ponder its signs and so remember. “ (38:29)

The above verse and scores of other such verses emphasize the importance of contemplation in the Qur'an and interpretation of the Qur'anic verses, although not an interpretation based on personal caprices and bias, but a just, truthful and balanced interpretation free of all traces of selfish interests. If we try to comprehend the Qur'an in an honest and unbiased way, it is not at all necessary to solve all problems that we find in it. In this regard the Qur'an is similar to Nature.

In Nature, too, a number of mysteries have neither been solved yet, nor can they be solved in present conditions, yet are likely to be solved in the future. Moreover, in studying and understanding nature, man has to tailor his ideas in accordance with Nature itself. He is forced to interpret Nature in accordance with its reality. He cannot define Nature in terms of his own caprices and inclinations.

The Qur'an, like the book of Nature, is a book that has not been sent for a specific age and time. Had it been otherwise, all the secrets of the Qur'an would have been discovered in the past; this heavenly Book would not have presented its charm, freshness and vitality.

But we see that the possibility of contemplation, reflection and discovery of new dimensions is inexhaustible in the case of this Holy Book. This is a point that has amply been emphasized and clarified by the Prophet and the Imams. In a tradition, it is related from the Prophet (S) that the Qur'an, like the sun and the moon, will present its movement and continuity; that is, the Qur'an is not static or monotonous.

In some other place the Prophet has said that outwardly the Qur'an is beautiful and inwardly it is deep

and unfathomable. In 'Uyun akhbar al-Rida, from the Imam al-Rida (A), it is quoted that Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (A) was asked about the secret of it that as the time passes and the more it is read and recited, the Qur'an increases in its novelty and freshness day by day. The Imam al-Sadiq (A) answered:

Because the Qur'an is not for an exclusive age or for an exclusive people.

The Qur'an has been sent for all ages and for all human beings. It is so composed that in spite of changes in knowledge, outlook and approach through various times and ages, it surpasses all learning and knowledge in all ages. While it encompasses mysteries and abstruse intricacies for the reader of every age, at the same time it presents a great feast of meanings and ideas that can satiate the needs of every time in accordance with the capacity of that particular age.

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