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Question 34: What Is Meant By 'Seven Heavens'?

Question: What is the purpose of the Qur'an in pointing towards 'seven heavens'?

Answer: Islamic scholars and commentators have narrated some clarifications regarding 'seven heavens' (towards which indication are made in the Holy Qur'an also).

1. Here by seven is meant to be multiplication (to be more). It means that He has created many heavens, i.e. He has created a number of times. And mostly it so happens that, in Arabic, Persian, Urdu or other languages, the mention of numbers is done in the sense of plenty. It means that a number is mentioned but no definite quantity is meant. The purpose of saying is to convey plenty.

For example, generally we say in Urdu that, I said this to you fifty times, or I have demanded from him ten times. However, it is not necessary that, the act should have been done for exactly fifty or ten times. But it is meant that I have said this many times or I have demanded that thing a number of times. The Holy Qur'an says about the word of Allah and the things known to Allah in this way:

"***And were every tree that is in the earth (made into) pens and the sea (to supply it with ink), with seven more seas to increase it, the words of Allah would not come to an end...***"[1]

It is obvious, here seven indicates excess, otherwise as we know, if there is an addition of ten or hundred oceans also, then too the unfathomed knowledge of Allah cannot be written, because Allah is by all means beyond words.

In the same way many other numbers 'sabeen' 'seventy', etc. also, are used in the sense of excess in the Holy Qur'an or other words (either in speech or writing) in Arabic and other languages. And the meaning of those numbers is not some definite number, but it is intended to point towards the excess of something.

2. By seven heavens it was meant to be those planets, which were known to the people of that period or they are those planets, which the general public of the present age can see with naked eyes.

3. By seven heavens are meant the multiple layers of different airs and gases that encircle the earth.

4. Still, according to the views of some great intellectuals, those small stars, galaxies and Milky Way, which are seen, all are part of the first heaven and beyond that six still bigger worlds are there. And by seven heavens the Holy Qur'an means all those seven worlds, which exist in the Universe.

May be man's present age of scientific knowledge and wisdom has raised the curtain from only one of it, still it is quite possible that in future, as a result of gaining more knowledge, on the back of present perceptible world six great worlds are discovered. Favoring this view we present the following verse as proof.

"***We have adorned the nearest heaven with an adornment, the stars,***"[2]

With this verse it is known that, all the stars are in the first heaven. (It should be remembered that in Arabic the word 'Duniya' means 'lower' and near.)

However, it seems necessary to mention that verses and traditions in which the number of heavens are said to be seven are not a corroboration of the theory of Ptolemaic astronomy in which he has presented the heavens as the layers of peels of onion like shape of heavenly spheres. (Because according to Ptolemaic theory the number of heavenly spheres and heavens are nine).

As long as seven earths are concerned (the mention of which is there in the Holy Qur'an is an indication and in some traditions, is given with specific mention). About them thoughts similar to the aforesaid are expressed.

For example, that the number seven is in the sense of many or that by seven earths it is meant seven planets. (Mercury, Venus, Saturn, Earth, Mars, Jupiter and moon). That is the same number in solar system, which we can see (no doubt, in solar system, there are other bodies and moon is also there but they cannot be seen with our naked eyes). And based on this explanation, by seven heavens is meant to be the same atmosphere, which exists on each of those seven heavenly bodies.

In other words, these seven bodies are counted as earth; the atmosphere surrounding them is their heaven. It should be remembered that in Arabic dictionary 'Samaa' is means all such things, which are placed towards the upper portion.

This was the summary of those different interpretations, which our scholars and writers of exegeses have presented about seven heavens and earths. Especially the last Tafseer, which seems to be more acceptable compared to all others and the narrations of those exegeses is in need of further explanation.

1. Surah Luqman 31:27
2. Surah Saffaat 37:6

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