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Section 1: Zachariah and John

Surah Maryam – Verses 1 - 3

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

كهيعص

ذِكْرُ رَحْمَتِ رَبِّكَ عَبْدَهُ زَكَرِيَّآ

إِذْ نَادَي رَبَّهُ نِدَآءً خَفِيّاً

In The Name of Allah, The Beneficent, The Merciful

1. ***"Kaf'k',Ha'h',Ya'y','Ain "A',Sad's'."***
2. (***This is***) ***a mention of the mercy of your Lord unto His servant Zachariah."***
3. ***"When he called upon his Lord in secret."***

The mentioned letters are among the 'Abbreviated Letters' of the Qur'an in which some mysteries and secrets are hidden. Some Islamic traditions indicate that each of these letters is a sign of one of the great names of Allah (The Names Most Beautiful). Kaf 'K' refers to /kafi/ (The Sufficient); Ha 'H' refers to /hadi/ (The Guide); Ya 'Y' refers to /waliyy/ (The Friend, The Protector, The Surety, The Patron); 'Ain 'A'

refers to /'alim/ (The Knower); and Sad 'S' refers to /sadiq-ul-wa'd/ (The One Who is Truthful in His promises). Sometimes, in some supplications, Allah (s.w.t.) is invoked through these abbreviated letters, in this manner:

"O Lord! by Ka, Ha, Ya, 'Ain, Sad."

In a supplication, for instance, Hadrat Ali-ibn-Abitalib (as) said:

*"O Allah! We ask you, O'Kaf, Ha, Ya, 'Ain, Sad!"*1

Some Islamic traditions state that these abbreviated letters indicate the event of the uprising of Imam Hussayn in Karbala, as follows: Kaf refers to 'Karbala', Ha refers to 'Halak' (the slaughter of the Prophet's progeny), Ya refers to 'Yazid', 'Ain refers to the subject of 'Atash (thirst), and Sad refers to 'Sabr' (the patience and steadfastness of Imam Hussayn and his self-sacrificing supporters).

It should be noted, of course, that the verses of the Qur'an have the capacity to have different meanings but despite the variety of meanings, they do not conflict with each other.

After the abbreviated letters at the beginning of Surah Maryam, the first verse concerning the story of Zachariah begins.

It says:

"(This is) a mention of the mercy of your Lord unto His servant Zachariah."

This event occurred at the time when Zachariah was very worried and sad because he did not have a child, and he, worshipping Him, called upon his Lord secretly.

The verse says:

"When he called upon his Lord in secret."

The Arabic term /nida/ means 'to call with a loud voice', and the Qur'anic word /xafiyya/ means 'in secret' not in a low voice, since such a call cannot be performed 'silently', but it can be done secretly.

Perhaps, the invocation of Zachariah, done in secret, was for the reason that his people would not scoff at him by saying why that old man wished Allah for a son.

Some Islamic literature indicates that the best supplication is that which is asked in secret, and the best provision is that which is sufficient. 2

Surah Maryam – Verses 4 – 5

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّي وَهَنَ الْعَظْمُ مِنِّي وَاشْتَعَلَ الرَّأْسُ شَيْباً وَلَمْ أَكُن بِدُعَآئِكَ رَبِّ شَقِيّاً

وَإِنِّي خِفْتُ الْمَوَالِيَ مِن وَرَآءِي وَكَانَتِ امْرَأَتِي عَاقِراً فَهَبْ لِي مِن لَّدُنكَ وَلِيّاً

4. "He said: 'My Lord! verily my bones are weakened and my head is all aflame with hoariness, and, my Lord! I have never been unblessed in prayer to You."
5. "And verily I fear my kindred after I am gone, and my wife is barren. So grant me from your presence a successor (a child)."

Zachariah invoked Allah saying that his bones, the pillars of his body and its most solid parts, were weakened and his head was all aflame with hoariness. By this statement, Zachariah might have wanted to say that the harbinger of death had been placed on his head and he had to get ready for death.

Here is the verse:

"He said: 'My Lord! verily my bones are weakened and my head is all aflame with hoariness..."

Then, immediately after that statement, he adds that he had been accustomed to the acceptance of his supplications by his Lord and that He had never withheld His blessings from him. Now that he was old and feeble, he was more in need of answers to his prayers, and that he would not be unblessed.

The verse continues saying:

"...and, my Lord! I have never been unblessed in prayer to You."

After that, he explained his supplication to Allah, as follows:

"And verily I fear my kindred after I am gone, and my wife is barren. So grant me from your presence a successor (a child)."

Explanations

The Arabic word /'aqir/ is applied for a man or a woman that cannot produce offspring.

The term /'išti'al/ means: 'the blaze of a fire when it flames and spreads'. Thus, the holy phrase 'and my head is all aflame with hoariness' means that the whiteness of the hair on my head blazed like fire and has spread.

Some of the commentators have said that the objective meaning of the Qur'anic word /waliyy/, mentioned in this holy verse, is 'a righteous son who succeeds the father'. Imam Sadiq (as) said that

Zachariah's anxiety was about his uncle and his cousins.3

Surah Maryam – Verses 6 – 8

يَرِثُنِي وَيَرِثُ مِنْ ءَالِ يَعْقُوبَ وَاجْعَلْهُ رَبِّ رَضِيّاً

يَا زَكَرِيَّآ إِنَّا نُبَشِّـرُكَ بِغُلاَمٍ اسْمُهُ يَحْيَي لَمْ نَجْعَل لَّهُ مِن قَبْلُ سَمِيّاً

قَالَ رَبِّ أَنَّي يَكُونُ لِي غُلاَمٌ وَكَانَتِ امْرَأَتِي عَاقِراً وَقَدْ بَلَغْتُ مِنَ الْكِبَرِ عِتِيّاً

6. "(One that) shall be my inheritor and the inheritor of the posterity of Jacob; and make him, my Lord, well-pleasing."
7. (His prayer was answered:) O' Zakariyya! verily We give you good tidings of a son whose name is Yahya (John). We have given the same name to none before (him)."
8. "He said: 'My Lord! How shall there be for me a son while my wife is barren and I have reached infirm old age?'"

Zachariah, the prophet, in his prayer, invoked Allah to grant him a successor to be the inheritor of him and the posterity of Jacob, and He would make him well-pleasing.

The verse says:

"(One that) shall be my inheritor and the inheritor of the posterity of Jacob; and make him, my Lord, well-pleasing."

The purpose of the phrase 'to inherit', here, has been rendered differently by the Islamic commentators. Some of them believe that 'heritage' in this verse is heritage in properties, while some others have said that it refers to the rank of prophethood.

A group of the commentators have also thought that the objective meaning of it is an inclusive concept which probably envelops both of them.

Many of the Shi'ite scholars have taken the first interpretation, while some Sunnite scholars have seized the second meaning, and some others, among Islamic scholars, such as: Sayyid-i-Qutb in Fi-Zilal and'Alusi in Rouh-ul-Ma'ani, have chosen the third idea.

Those who have taken it, confined to the inheritance of property, have reasoned to the existence of the word /yariu/ (inheritor) in this sense. For, when this word is used apart from other evidences, it means 'the inheritance of the wealth'.

But when it is used in the sense of spiritual affairs, it is usually for the sake of the existence of some evidence in that verse; like Surah Fatir, No 95, verse 32 which says:

"Then We gave the Book for an inheritance to those whom We chose from among Our servants..."

Moreover, the wife of Zachariah, who was from the progeny of Solayman-ibn-Dawood, regarding the very good condition of Solayman and Dawood's wealth, had inherited some considerable properties.

Zachariah was afraid that those properties would be obtained by some impious persons who might amass them, or use them in a false way, which itself could be the source of a corruption in the society.

That was why he asked his Lord to grant him a righteous child so that this offspring might protect those properties and spend them in the best way.

It is narrated in a tradition that Fatimat-uz-Zahra (as), the pure daughter of the Prophet of Islam (S), reasoned to defend her claim to Fadak. This incident is another evidence upon the above idea.

The Late Tabarsi, in his book'Ihtijaj, has said regarding this issue concerning the Lady of Islam (as), as follows:

When some people had decided to withhold Fadak from Fatimah (as), and she was informed of it, she said:

"Is there in the Book of Allah that you inherit from your father and I do not inherit from my father? Verily you have done a very indecent thing. 4 ***Did you deliberately leave out from the Book of Allah where, in the story of Yahya-ibn-Zakariyya, it says: 'O Lord! Grant me from Your presence a successor*** (***a child***)***;*** (***One that***) ***shall be my inheritor and the inheritor of the posterity of Jacob?'"***

For more information on the idea of 'inheritance' as something spiritual, or both spiritual and material you may refer to Tafsir-i-Atyab-ul-Bayan, as well as other great commentaries of Islamic scholars.

However, the Arabic word /radiyy/ means both: 'being well-pleased with Allah' and 'being loved by people'. The rank of Allah being well-pleased with a person, and vice versa, is the best rank, a great salvation.

The subsequent verse states that the prayer of Zachariah was accepted in the presence of Allah, an acceptance with full grace and particular favour.

The words of Allah in the verse are recited as follows:

"(His prayer was answered:) O' Zakariyya! Verily We give you good tidings of a son whose name is Yahya (John). We have given the same name to none before (him)."

The Qur'anic phrase 'the same name to none before (him)' means either that the name 'Yahya' had not been used before him, or that such personal qualities were not found in any one before him.

Zachariah, who did not see the relevant preconditions to assist in gaining what he desired, asked Allah to explain the circumstance for him.

The verse says:

"He said: 'My Lord! How shall there be for me a son while my wife is barren and I have reached infirm old age?'"

Zachariah, saying:

"How shall there be for me a son...?"

means whether he and his wife would become young again, or they would have a child in the same state of old age.5

Yes, even the prophets' knowledge is limited, and their surprise about something does not contrast with the rank of their prophethood.

However, the Qur'anic word /'itiyya/ means 'to go beyond the limit' which is usually said upon a person whose body has lost its elasticity as a result of old age.

Imam Baqir (as) said that five years elapsed between the time when the glad tidings was given and when the birth of Yahya occurred.6

Surah Maryam – Verses 9 – 10

قَالَ كَذَلِكَ قَالَ رَبُّكَ هُوَ عَلَيَّ هَيِّنٌ وَقَدْ خَلَقْتُكَ مِن قَبْلُ وَلَمْ تَكُ شَيْئاً

قَالَ رَبِّ اجْعَل لِّي ءَايَةً قَالَ ءَايَتُكَ أَلاَّ تُكَلِّمَ النَّاسَ ثَلاَثَ لَيَالٍ سَوِيّاً

9. "He said: 'So (it will be)'. Your Lord says: 'It is easy for Me, for indeed I created you aforetime

when you were nothing'."

10. "He (Zachariah) said: 'My Lord! appoint for me a sign.' Said He: 'Your sign is that you shall not be able to speak to the people for three nights, though sound (in health)."

Allah (s.w.t.) is able to do every thing and every work is easy for Him, as in this verse, He says:

"It is easy for Me".

In Surah Al-Hadid, No. 57, verse 22 and in Surah At-Taqabun, No. 64, verse 7, the words are recited:

"...that is easy to Allah";

and in Surah Al-Baqarah, No.2, verses 20 and 106, it is recited:

"...Allah is All-powerful over everything";

and in Surah Al-Kahf, No. 18, verse 45 the Qur'an says:

"...Allah is omnipotent over everything".

Therefore, Zachariah asked Allah how that matter could happen, and He said:

"So (it will be)"

and Allah (s.w.t.) can strengthen his power in old age to give him offspring.

In other words, Allah is the One Who is able to create all things from aught, and then it is not surprising that He bestows a child upon Zachariah in his old age and in those conditions.

The verse says:

"He said: 'So (it will be)'. Your Lord says: 'It is easy for Me, for indeed I created you aforetime when you were nothing'."

By hearing the abovementioned hope-inspiring statement, Zachariah became very happy and encouraged and the light of hopefulness illuminated his entire being, however, since that message was very magnificent and constructive for him, he asked Allah for a sign, as follows:

"He (Zachariah) said: 'My Lord! appoint for me a sign.'..."

No doubt Zachariah believed in Allah's promise, but, in order to be more assured, he asked Him for such a sign. This was similar to Abraham's, way who was certain of the Resurrection, yet he asked to see an aspect of the resurrection in this world in order that his heart would become more certain.

Then Zachariah (as) received this answer:

"…Said He: 'Your sign is that you shall not be able to speak to the people for three nights, though sound (in health)."

During those three days and nights Zachariah's tongue (as) could move only for prayers to Allah (s.w.t.) as well as in supplicating unto Him.

This was a clear sign, of course, in that a person would not able to speak with people while his tongue and his body were utterly sound and he could pray and worship to Allah fluently.

In the books of commentaries of Majma'-ul-Bayan, of At-Tabari, and Al-Mizan, it has been said that, at the time of recitation of the Divine communications and the remembrance of Allah (s.w.t.), Zachariah's tongue could utter words fluently and correctly, but when he wanted to use his tongue to speak with people, his tongue remained silent.

Of course, Zachariah (as) asked Allah (s.w.t.) for a sign to recognize between right and wrong, and between the divine revelations and satanic delusions.7

This itself is an evidence to the fact that all our actions are under the Will and device of Allah, so that if He let not we are not able to speak even when we are in a complete health.

Surah Maryam – Verse 11

فَخَرَجَ عَلَي قَوْمِهِ مِنَ الْمِحْرَابِ فَاَوْحَي إِلَيْهِمْ أَن سَبِّحُوا بُكْرَةً وَعَشِيّاً

11. "Then he went out (of the sanctuary) unto his people and made signs unto them that they should glorify (Allah) morning and evening."

The Qur'anic word /bukrah/ is used for the length of time between the dawn until the sunrise.

The term /mihrab/ (sanctuary) is called such since it is a fighting-place against Satan and the temptations which hinder man's concentration of thought. Perhaps, the sanctuaries of the Children of Israel had been the same places of prayer which people had chosen for their Divine service and they worshipped therein.

According to what Tabarsi and Fakhr-i-Razi have said, the purpose of /tasbih/ (to glorify), used in this verse, is 'prayer', because 'prayer' contains 'glorification'. After this glad tidings and that clear Sign, Zachariah came out of his prayer niche and went unto his people.

Then he signed to them that they should glorify Allah every morning and evening. For, the result of the great bounty, which Allah had bestowed Zachariah, would encompass all those people and could be

effective in their fate totally.

The verse says:

"Then he went out (of the sanctuary) unto his people and made signs unto them that they should glorify (Allah) morning and evening."

Moreover, this bounty, which was counted a miracle, could firm the foundations of belief in their hearts.

Some Traditions

1. The Messenger of Allah (S) said:

*"The most beloved sayings with Allah, the Glorious, is that the servant says: 'Glory be to my Lord and praise be to Him'."*8

2. Imam Sadiq (as) said:

*"Whoever glorifies Allah thirty times every day, Allah, the Blessed, the Exalted, may remove seventy afflictions from him, the least of which is poverty."*9

3. Imam Sadiq (as) said:

*"The hymns of Fatimatuz-Zahra, after every prayer, is more beloved with me than one thousand units (rak'ah) of prayer in a day."*10

Surah Maryam – Verses 12 - 13

يَا يَحْيَي خُذِ الْكِتَابَ بِقُوَّةٍ وءَاتَيْنَاهُ الْحُكْمَ صَبِيّاً

وَحَنَاناً مِن لَّدُنَّا وَزَكَاةً وَكَانَ تَقِيّاً

12. "'O' Yahya! Take hold of the Book with might.' And We gave him wisdom (apostleship) while yet a child."
13. "And (also) compassion from Us and piety and he was God-fearing."

The Qur'anic term /hukm/ means: 'knowledge and understanding.'11 It has also been applied in the sense of 'ability and judgment'12, while it is cited in Tafsir-i-Al-Mizan that the objective meaning of /hukm/, in this verse, is: 'knowledge unto the Divine sciences and the removal of the curtain of Unseen'.

Three persons became prophets in childhood. They were Solomon, Jesus, and John (as). There were also three persons who became Imam in their childhood: Imam Jawad (the ninth Imam), Imam Hadi (the tenth Imam) and Imam Mahdi (the twelfth Imam), peace be upon them all, because the rank of prophethood and Imamate is granted by Allah.

Moreover, Divine prophets and the Immaculate Imams were bestowed upon all virtues and sciences in the same World of Light. Therefore they could speak and solve the problems even when they were in the wombs of their mothers, in their cradles, and at the moment of their birth.

There are recorded many Islamic traditions in this regard in which it is also said that even Siddighah-Tahirah, who was neither a prophet nor an Imam, had this quality, too.[13]

However, former verses denoted that Allah bestowed on Zachariah a son named Yahya (John) when he was in old age.

Following that matter, in this verse, the great commandment of Allah unto John is recited, as follows:

"'O' Yahya! Take hold of the Book with might.'..."

The objective meaning of 'the Book' here is Turah, and the purpose of 'taking hold of the Book with might' is that he should carry through its content with an intensive sharp conclusiveness, and should act accordingly, so that he could enjoy any material and spiritual power, whether personal and social, in the way of its expansion and generalization.

Next to this commandment, the Qur'an points to the merits that Allah had granted to John, or he had obtained them with the grace of Allah, where it says:

"...And We gave him wisdom (apostleship) while yet a child."

1. Allah gave him the command of prophethood, wisdom, talent and perspicacity in childhood.

2. And he was also given mercy and compassion in respect to people from the side of Allah:

"And also compassion from Us..."

3. And Allah gave him piety and purity of soul, spirit, and action:

"...piety..."

4. And he avoided whatever was other than the command of Allah:

"...and he was God-fearing."

By the way, the Qur'anic term /hanan/ means 'compassion, kindness'. Thus, it was the compassion of Allah to John and John's love to Allah, which caused the kindness of people to John and John's affection

unto people, all of which were from the Grace of Allah and His Mercy.

Surah Maryam – Verses 14 – 15

وَبَرًّا بِوَالِدَيْهِ وَلَمْ يَكُن جَبَّاراً عَصِيّاً

وَسَلاَمٌ عَلَيْهِ يَوْمَ وُلِدَ وَيَوْمَ يَمُوتُ وَيَوْمَ يُبْعَثُ حَيّاً

14. "And kindness to his parents, and (unto the people) he was neither insolent (nor) disobedient."
15. "And peace on him the day he was born, and the day he dies, and the day he shall be raised alive!"

Hadrat Yahya (John) was very kind to his parents and obeyed them. He tried to make them happy, because obeying parents is obligatory, and opposing them is forbidden. He also did not commit any sin, transgression, and was never proud. He hurt no one.

The verse says:

"And kindness to his parents, and (unto the people) he was neither insolent (nor) disobedient."

Therefore, since Yahya (as) was qualified with all prominent epithets and great honours, then peace upon him, as the verse says:

"And peace on him the day he was born, and the day he dies, and the day he shall be raised alive!"

Some commentators have said that the most horrible states of a person may appear in three circumstances:

1) The day when he comes out from the mother's womb and enters into the world.

2) The day he dies and finds himself among the people whom he has not seen.

3) The day when he will be raised alive and finds himself in a great place of gathering. Allah favoured John by His Grace and endowed security on him in these three circumstances. Thus, Yahya (John) passed all the narrow passages successfully with the safety of religion and belief in Allah.

To hold dear the annual birthday, and remembrance of the annual day of death of the saints of Allah, of

course, is a Qur'anic matter.

Some Points Upon John's Martyrdom

Not only was the birth of John marvelous, but so was his death from some points of view. Most Muslim historians, as well as some famous Christian sources, have recorded the event of this martyrdom, (with slight differences), as follows:

Yahya (John) was sacrificed because of the liaison one of the tyrants of his age had with a woman related to him within the forbidden degrees. Herod, the sensual king of Palestine, was in love with Herodias, his niece, whose beauty had captured his heart in the fire of love. Therefore, he decided to marry her.

When Yahya (John), the great prophet of Allah (as), was informed of this he promptly announced there and then that their marriage was unlawful and it was contrary to the laws of the Torah and that Yahya (John) would struggle against it.

This news was spread throughout the city and the woman, Herodias, became aware of it. She, considered Yahya (John) the greatest barrier on her way, and decided to take revenge upon him at the most suitable opportunity, and remove this obstruction in her way.

She intensified her relation with her uncle and made her beauty as a trap for him. She had such a deep influence that one day Herod told her to ask him whatever desire she had and she could be certain that her demand would assuredly be performed.

Horodias said that she wanted nothing but the head of Yahya, because Yahya had defamed both of them, and all people found fault concerning them. She replied if Herod wanted to comfort her heart and make her happy, he should do that accomplishment.

Herod, who was madly in love of that lady, inattentive to the end of that action, submitted and very soon the head of John was presented to that wicked woman. But, finally, the painful results of that hideous action encompassed her.[14]

Some Islamic traditions indicate that Imam Hussayn (as) the Great Martyr, said;

"From among the mean aspects of this world is that the head of Yahya-ibn-Zachariah was brought as a present to a wicked woman from the Children of Israel."

This statement means that, from this point of view, the conditions of Yahya and those of Imam Hussayn (as) were alike, because one of the aims of his rising was standing against the evil deeds of the tyrant of his time, Yazid.

1. Majma‘-ul-Bayan, the Commentary
2. Tafsir-i-Majma‘-ul-Bayan
3. Nur-uth-Thaqalayn, the Commentary
4. Surah Maryam, No. 19, verse 27
5. Tafsir-i-Kabir by Fakhr-i-Razi
6. Majma‘-ul-Bayan, and Bihar-ul-’Anwar, vol. 14, p. 176
7. Tafsir-i-Al-Mizan
8. Kanz-ul-’Ummal, vol. 1, p. 466
9. Amali by Sadugh, p. 55
10. Muhajjat-ul-Bayda’, vol. 2, p. 348
11. Lisan-ul-‘Arab
12. Qamus-ul-Qur’an
13. Tafsir-i-Atyab-ul-Bayan, and Reyhanatun-Nabiyy, p. 60
14. Some Evangels and some religious literatures denote that Herod married his brother’s wife, which was forbidden in the laws of the Turah. Yahya scorned him for that action. Them that woman, by misusing the beauty of her daughter, caused Herod to kill Yahya (John). (The Gospel according to ST. Matthew, Chapter 14; and accrding to ST. Mark, Chapter 6, No. 17 on)

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