

Allegorical verses in the Quran

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 4 September 2020

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَابَهَ مِنْهُ ابْتِغَاءَ الْفِتْنَةِ وَابْتِغَاءَ تَأْوِيلِهِ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ آمَنَّا بِهِ كُلٌّ مِّنْ عِنْدِ رَبِّنَا وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّا أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ ﴿٤٦﴾

“He it is Who has revealed the Book to you; some of its verses are decisive — they are the basis of the Book — and others are allegorical. Then those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part of it which is allegorical, seeking to mislead, and seeking to give it (their own) interpretation. And none knows its interpretation except Allah, and those firmly rooted in knowledge. They say: We believe in it, it is all from our Lord. And none are mindful except those who have understanding.” (The Quran, 3:7)

This verse occurs at the start of ch. 3 of the Quran. The well-known verse at the start of ch. 2 is the following:

ذَلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ

“This Book, in which there is no doubt, is a guide to those who keep their duty” (2:2).

So the Quran tells us about itself and its status right at the beginning of these chapters. Just as this verse in ch. 2 states that the Quran is a guidance to whoever has a serious regard for his duty, the verse 7 of ch. 3 informs us of a principle for correctly understanding the Quran. It says that some of its verses are absolutely clear in meaning, and they are the basis or fundamentals of the book. They must be accepted and followed exactly as they are. Others are “allegorical”, which means that they use certain words not literally but symbolically or as what are called figures of speech. The Arabic term used here for allegorical is *mutashābihāt*, and indicates describing

something by likening it to something else. In our everyday language many words are used allegorically. Names of parts of the body, such as head, mouth, heart, foot etc. are used, for example: head of an organization, mouth of a river, heart of the matter.

This verse goes on to say that some people, who have a perverse mentality, who are not right-thinking, place the allegorical verses above the decisive ones and draw from them wrong conclusions, give them unjustified interpretations, and mislead others.

This applies not only to the Quran but to other writings also. You find that some principles are stated clearly, but there are some statements which, if you take them literally, go against those principles, and certain people accept those wrong interpretations. This verse occurs in the Quran just before a discussion about Jesus, in which we are told that Jesus taught his people: “Surely Allah is my Lord and your Lord, so serve Him. This is the right path” (3:51). This is a decisive statement by him. In the Gospels too, Jesus says: “For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother” (Matthew, 12:50). This is the same as saying that God is my Lord and the Lord of my followers.

He also said:

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Matthew, 7:21).

“For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.” (John, 6:38)

But then there are other statements such as: “I and the Father are one” (John, 10:30). The Christian priests and theologians placed such allegorical descriptions above the fundamental principles and raised Jesus to a Divine status. It is this statement which should have been interpreted. It has the meaning that I am so entirely devoted to carrying out the commands of God that it is as if all you can see in me is the Father.

There are plenty of allegorical statements in the Quran. For example, in some places it mentions the physically blind such as “He frowned and turned away, because the blind man came to him (80:1–2), which refers to a well-known incident during the early part of the Holy Prophet’s mission. But in many more places the same word is used to mean those who are blind to guidance. In one place it says: “Clear proofs have indeed come to you from your Lord; so whoever *sees*, it is for his own good; and whoever is *blind*, it is to his own harm” (6:104). In another place it tells the Holy Prophet that people look at you “but can you give guidance to the blind if they will not see” (10:43). This shows that prophets came to show the way to the spiritually blind, some of whom saw the guidance and others remained in their blindness. So when the Quran mentions that Jesus healed the blind, it means he gave sight and guidance to the spiritually blind. His healing the blind must be considered as an allegorical description, because the decisive verses of the Quran relating to the prophets and the blind people have established that it is the spiritually blind to whom the prophets give healing.

The Quran also mentions the hand or the two hands of God. We pray to Allah: “In your hand is the good”, *bi-yadika-l-khair* (3:26). Allah says to the devil about man, or Adam, that I created him with my two hands (38:75). Regarding the Muslims who, at a certain dangerous juncture at Hudaibiyah, pledged loyalty to the Holy Prophet by placing their hands under his hand, the Quran says about them: “Those who swear allegiance to you only swear allegiance to Allah. Allah’s hand is above their hands” (48:10). It was, of course, the Holy Prophet’s hand which was above their hands, but in swearing allegiance at his hand they were swearing allegiance to the cause of Allah for which the Holy Prophet arose.

Despite all this mention of the hand and two hands of Allah, the decisive verses of the Quran teach that nothing in this world can be likened to Him. The hand is an allegorical description of the authority of God and we cannot give it a meaning which goes against the decisive verses of the Quran.

The Quran also mentions Allah as being on his throne or *'arsh*. Some commentators of the Quran of some centuries ago even claimed to have worked out the length and breadth and weight of this throne. But again, to interpret it literally as a throne runs contrary to the decisive attributes of God given in the Quran. He does not need any physical thing to sit on. There is also the famous *ayat-ul-kursi*, literally the 'verse of the chair' (2:255), which says that the *kursi* of Allah extends over the heavens and the earth. Literally, the word does mean 'chair', and some foolishly believe that Allah has a huge chair to sit on. But this word means *knowledge* here, and the words just before the mention of the chair are: "And they encompass nothing of His *knowledge* except what He pleases."

The verse which is the subject of this *khutba* goes on to say: "And none knows its interpretation except Allah, and those firmly rooted in knowledge. They say: We believe in it, *it is all from our Lord*." This shows that those persons can find the interpretation who are firmly rooted in knowledge, *rāsikhūna fil- 'ilm*. And they apply the principle that "it is all from our Lord", meaning that if allegorical verses are from Allah, then so are the decisive verses. Therefore, we must make the meanings of the two kinds of verses fit together, and not create contradictions between them.

In the above words, most commentators and translators place a pause after "Allah" and take these words as: "And none knows its interpretation except Allah [full stop]. And those firmly rooted in knowledge, say: We believe in it, it is all from our Lord." This would mean that only Allah knows the interpretation of the allegorical verses, and no one else can know it. A few commentators, like Maulana Muhammad Ali, don't place a pause here, and take these words as: "And none knows its interpretation except Allah, and those firmly rooted in knowledge."

It is said in the *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*: "Scholars of Quran recitation have different opinions about pausing at Allah's Name in this Ayah." This Tafsir mentions the standpoint of those who don't place the pause at this point, who say that the knowledgeable ones can also know the interpretation, not only Allah. Their standpoint is that "the Quran does not address the people with what they cannot understand".

They say that it cannot be that Allah reveals something and then tells people: Only I know its interpretation, none of you can know it. Tafsir Ibn Kathir also quotes a saying of Ibn Abbas as follows: “I am one of those who are firmly rooted in knowledge who know the interpretation”. There is also a hadith, in Ibn Majah, that the Holy Prophet prayed to Allah for Ibn Abbas as follows: اللَّهُمَّ عَلِّمَهُ الْحِكْمَةَ وَتَأْوِيلَ الْكِتَابِ “O Allah, teach him wisdom and the interpretation of the book” (Ibn Majah, Book of Sunnah).

It is, of course, true that Allah’s knowledge is infinite as compared to man’s, but when Allah Himself reveals something for people’s guidance He cannot then say to them: Only I know the interpretation.

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