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The Knowledge of God

A. The Knowledge of Al-Ghayb

Al-Ghayb means "unseen" or "hidden" things. *Ilmu 'l ghayb* means knowledge of the things which are hidden at present, like the events of the future. Such knowledge is the sole prerogative of Allah. Nobody can know the *ghayb* except Allah.

Of course, many of us can forecast hundreds of things which are to happen in future. We know in advance the time and extent of tide; we know the exact day, time and extent of solar and lunar eclipses. Weathermen forecast the rain, storm, cyclone and many such conditions of season and weather.

By looking at the feature of a man, some of us can even say with a degree of certainty what is the character and nature of that person. Doctors and physicians can easily gauge the chances of survival of their patients. You may find many such examples in your daily life. Is it same as *'ilmu 'l ghayb*? Does the weatherman know the *ghayb*?

The answer is 'No'. Because all such forecasts and prophecies are based upon the observation of the laws of nature. By keen observation and deduction, we are in a position to know many things in advance. Such advance knowledge is based upon deduction and observation of physical laws.

The *'ilmu 'l-ghayb* which is mentioned in the Qur'an as the sole prerogative of Allah, is the knowledge of the unseen things and future events which is not based on deduction or observation of physical laws: It is this type of knowledge which has been referred to in the following verse:

(Allah is) the Knower of the unseen, and nor does He reveal His secrets to any one, except the one whom He chooses from among the messengers; for verily He causes a guard to march before him and after him. (72:26-27)

This verse and many similar verses declare in unambiguous terms that the knowledge of unseen things and future events, not based on observation of physical laws or deduction, is with God only. And He, in

His own wisdom, selects some messengers, prophets and Imams to divulge to them such knowledge as and when He thinks fit.

In short, nobody can know the unseen things or future events (without some present signs or deductions) except Allah. And Allah, in His grace, informs whoever He selects for *such* knowledge, be they angels, prophets or Imams.

In the sayings of the Imams of Ahlu'l-bayt, it has been explained that Allah had revealed only one of His Great Names to 'Asif bin Barkhiya (the vizier of Prophet Sulayman); and by that one part of the knowledge he was able to bring the throne of Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba, from her capital to Jerusalem within any eye-wink. 1

But Allah had given our Holy Prophet (upon him and his progeny be peace) all the knowledge given to all the prophets from Adam onwards (upon them be peace), as well as the knowledge given to all the angels; and then his knowledge was being increased constantly.

And he, by divine order, taught all that to 'Ali (upon him be peace); and that knowledge passing through the succeeding Imams has come to Imam al-Mahdi (upon all of them be peace). 2 That is why they have been called 'the Treasurers of Allah's knowledge. 3

"Lawh mah fuz" and "Lawh mahw wa ithbat"

Lawh means "tablet of wood or stone used for writing". Metaphorically, it is used for "knowledge," because knowledge usually comes from written things. *Mahfuz* means secure; in safe keeping; something that cannot be apprehended by unauthorised persons; firmly protected. Therefore, "*lawh mahfuz*" means the knowledge which cannot be apprehended by others; the knowledge which is firmly protected.

Mahw means erasure; rubbing something out. *Ithbat* means affirmation; writing. Therefore, "*lawh mahw wa ithbat*" means the knowledge which is capable of erasure and substitution; the knowledge which is liable to change from time to time.

Now that you know the literal meanings of "*lawh mahfuz*" and "*lawh mahw wa ithbat*," let me explain what is meant by these two terms in Islam.

We know that the knowledge of God can never be wrong. In other words, there can never be any change in the knowledge of God. It is for this reason that God has called His own knowledge as "*lawh mahfuz*". This phrase describes the knowledge of Allah because His knowledge can never change. It is always correct and needs no erasure or substitution or modification.

"*Ummu l-kitab*" is another name used for the knowledge of Allah. It means "the basic book," "the mother of the book." Allah's knowledge is called "the basic book;" that is, the basic knowledge; or "the mother of

the book," that is, the source of knowledge because only His knowledge can be called "the true knowledge".

"*Lawh mahw wa ithbat*" is the name given by God to the knowledge of the angels, prophets and Imams. Their knowledge, though the most complete and perfect of all human beings, is still incomplete when compared to the knowledge of God.

These names have been taken from the following verse of the Qur'an:

For every term there is a book prescribed; Allah erases out whatever He pleases and writes (whatever He pleases); and with Him is the mother of the book. (13:39)

This 'mother of the book' is called "*lawh mahfuz*" in the following verse:

Nay, it is the glorious Qur'an, in the guarded tablet. (85:22)

As the knowledge of the angels, prophets and Imams is constantly being replenished, perfected and completed, it is called 'the tablet of erasure and writing – *lawh mahw wa ithbat*. . 4

More will be said about *lawh mahw wa ithbat* in the following section.

B. The Theory of Bada'

1. Bada' in the Qur'an

It appears from many stories in the Qur'an that sometimes Allah, in His mercy and wisdom, reveals only a part of His future plan to the angels or the prophets concerned. They are informed of His plan to a certain stage, and the knowledge of the later stage is not revealed to them. Before explaining the theory further, let me give you some examples from the Qur'an.

a) The People of Yunus

First of all comes the episode of the people of Prophet Yunus. Allah refers to that episode – in this verse:

And why, there was not a town which believed and its faith profited it except the people of Yunus. When they believed We removed from them the torment of ignominy in the life of this world and provided them (with comfort to enjoy it) for a fixed while. (10:98)

The fact is that the tribe of Prophet Yunus had rejected him; and only two persons had believed in him; one of them a pious person but without knowledge, the other one a righteous man with knowledge. When Prophet Yunus prayed to Allah to send punishment and affliction upon his people because of their disbelief, Allah promised him that on a certain day affliction would visit them.

Prophet Yunus with his pious companion left his people and went away. But the learned man remained

with the people and tried to put the fear of God in their hearts. He told them that there still was time to repent from their *kufr*, to believe in God and His prophet, Yunus, and then to pray to God to avert that affliction.

On the appointed day, the children were separated from the mothers and the calves from the mother-cows; everybody fasted, all of them went out of the village; there they cried, they prayed, they prostrated to God and asked His forgiveness and pray, to Him to avert that affliction.

The sky was covered with black clouds, day became like night, thunder and lightening were shattering the whole atmosphere. It appeared that soon the punishment from God would wipe out the whole nation of Prophet Yunus. It was fortunate that they had repented before seeing the punishment; and, therefore, God in His mercy forgave them, and as their prayers, crying and weeping continued, gradually the sky became dear, the clouds went away and all were saved.

Then they waited for Prophet Yunus to return so that they might follow him. Next day Prophet Yunus came back expecting to see the town destroyed. Instead, he saw a shepherd tending to his herd. He thought that God did not keep His promise, and so he did not enter the town.

Here I am not concerned with the whole incident. What I want to show is that Allah knew before hand that the people of Prophet Yunus would repent, accept the true faith and believe in Prophet Yunus and his God; and thereupon they would eventually be saved.

But He did not reveal the whole event to Yunus. Prophet Yunus was informed only that the affliction was to visit them. Naturally he thought that the affliction would wipe out the whole community. Since he was not told, he did not know that before coming of the affliction, the community would repent and that all of them would be saved. It is clear that Allah informed Yunus of the events to a certain stage without telling him the conclusion.

Why was it done so? Because if Prophet Yunus had known that affliction would visit them and then go away, his exhortations would not have in them the force of sincerity that softened the hearts of his people. If that learned companion of Prophet Yuus had known that affliction would visit and then would dear away, he could not have exhorted them so sincerely and so his words would have fallen on deaf ears.

It was because Allah, in His own mercy ail according to His wise plan, wanted them to listen to the voice of wisdom, He did not reveal the whole future to Yunus. It was not that Allah had told him a lie, or had not intended to keep His promise.

He had not told Yunus that his people would be wiped out by that affliction. The promise was kept. But it was not promised that the people would be destroyed. It was not promised by Allah—though all of the parties concerned had thought that the people were going to be destroyed.

This episode clearly shows that God, because of His mercy and wisdom, withheld the knowledge of later stages from Prophet Yunus. Yunus came to know of the whole plan after that plan was carried out and put into effect.

b) The Sacrifice of Prophet Isma'il

Now let us look at another example. Prophet Ibrahim was shown in a dream that he was sacrificing his son in the name of God. As it was a dream, he must have seen how he was to kill Isma'il. He must have seen himself binding the hands and feet of the child, blindfolding himself and then putting the knife on the child's throat and pressing it down. Naturally, by seeing this dream he thought he was required to kill his only son Isma'il in that way. Therefore, he steeled his heart to sacrifice his only child.

The child heard it and prepared himself to be killed in obedience to the command of God. Father and son both were willing to sacrifice everything in the name of Allah. Prophet Ibrahim did as he had dreamed himself doing; he bound the hands and feet of the child and put him in the position of prostration; and blindfolding himself, put the knife and cut the throat. After removing the blindfold from his eyes, he saw Isma'il smiling and a lamb slaughtered in his place.

Prophet Ibrahim thought that he had failed in his test. But he had done what he had seen himself doing in dream. Of course, Allah had not informed him of the events up to the last stage. Because if Ibrahim had known that Isma'il would be saved, or if Isma'il had known that he would be saved, there would have been no meaning in that test; there would not have been any chance of showing their willingness to sacrifice everything in the name of Allah.

So God showed to Ibrahim in his dream the events to a certain stage but kept him unaware of the first stage; not informing him how the whole episode was to end. Because they did not know the result. Ibrahim and Isma'il were able to show, how willing they were to obey the command of God even to the extent of sacrificing their lives and the lives of their dear ones in His name.

If they had known the result from the beginning, the test would have been meaningless.

c) Tawrat Given to Prophet Musa

A third example concerns Prophet Musa and the revelation of Tawrat. Prophet Musa was ordered to go to Mount Sinai, fast there for thirty days in preparation for receiving the tablets of Tawrat. On the thirtieth day he cleansed his teeth and went to Mount Sinai.

There he was asked by God as why did he cleanse his teeth. He explained that as he was coming to a holy place, he thought it proper to make himself neat and clean. God told him that the smell of the mouth of a fasting person was sweeter before God than the smell of musk and ambergris.

And then he was told to return to his staying place, and fast for ten more days and then come to Mount Sinai without cleansing his teeth. Thus it was on the fortieth day that he was given the stone tablets of

Tawrat.

Allah knew from ever that Musa would come after cleansing his teeth, and would be asked to fast for ten more days. But neither Musa nor the Israelites had been told about it; nor Musa was told before hand that he was not to cleanse his teeth on the thirtieth day.

When Allah refers to His knowledge, He describes the whole period of forty nights together:

When we made appointment with Musa for forty nights. then you (the Israelites) took the (image of) calf (for your god) after he left you and thus you transgressed. (2:51)

And where He refers to the knowledge of Musa, He mentions the thirty days and the ten days separately:

And We made an appointment with Musa for thirty nights; and We completed it with ten (more); thus was completed the term of his Lord forty nights. (7: 142)

The reason of not giving the advance information is clear from the behavior of the Israelites who because of his ten days delay, left worshipping the only and true Allah and started worshipping the image of a calf. The story is given beautifully in the following verses of the Qur'an,

Said God to Musa, "Verily We have tested thy people in thy absence, and the Samiri had led them astray." So returned Musa unto his people angered, and sorrowful. Said he, "O my people, did not your Lord promise you a good promise? Did then the promise seem long to you, or did you want the wrath from your Lord should light upon you, that you violated the promise with me?"

Said they, "We violated not thy promise of our own accord..." Then he (Samiri) brought forth for them a calf. a mere body, with a lowing sound. Then they said, "This is your god and the god of Musa, but he (Musa) has forgotten." (20:85-88)

Just imagine a whole community of several thousand companions of an *ulu 'l-'azm* prophet, in the presence of his successor and vicegerent Harun, leaving the path of true religion and starting idol-worship, just because Musa was delayed for a few days! This test of faith could not have been conducted if Allah would had told Musa that he was supposed to stay for forty days; or if he had been told before hand not to cleanse his teeth on the thirtieth day.

2. The Meaning of Bada'

These three examples taken from the Qur'an are enough to show that Allah makes known His plan to the angels, prophets or Imams only to that extent *which* is beneficial to the mankind or which is necessary to make a test meaningful.

When the time comes for the angel, the prophet or the Imam concerned to think that the plan of work is

nearing its end, a new development extends the plan or brings it to an unexpected end. This new development is called *bada'* in Arabic which means "to appear".

There is no need to emphasize that this appearance or clarification does not concern Allah who knew every thing from ever. It refers to the knowledge of His creatures who come to know at the end of God's plan what they did not know before.

And it is also for this reason that the knowledge of angels, prophets and Imams is called *lawh mahw wa ithbat* (the tablet of erasure and substitution), while the knowledge of Allah is called *lawh mahfuz* (the protected tablet) which is above any change or substitution.

3. The Benefits of Bada'

There are many reasons for this partial revelation. Some of them may be enumerated here. (In the above mentioned three stories of the Qur'an, you may find two benefits of *bada'*.)

1. *Bada'* helps the servants of Allah to discard their wrong beliefs and come unto the right path, as happened in the case of the people of Prophet Yunus (upon whom be peace).

2. *Bada'* helps in the test of individuals or the communities, as was the case with Prophet Ibrahim and Isma'il (peace be upon them), and with the Israelites.

3. As the angels can never be sure that the plan of the events as told to them is final, they constantly seek the guidance from Allah. Thus they never think of themselves as being independent of the guidance and commandments of Allah.

4. Likewise, the prophets and the Imams can never think that they had known all there was to know. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny) was advised to always pray: "O My Lord increase my knowledge." ⁵

Imam Zaynu'l-'Abidin (peace be upon him) said, "Had there not been for a verse in the Qur'an, I could have told all the events up to the qiyamah." On being asked, "Which verse?", he recited, "Allah erases whatever He pleases and writes (whatever He pleases)." ⁶ This verse has been explained in section "A" of this chapter.

It must be mentioned here that many times Allah informs the angels, the prophets or the Imams about future events, clearly telling them that it was the final word. In such cases there can be no amendment of the plan and no erasure or substitution.

5. The human beings can never know what is in store for them in the future. Thus they will always seek the help and mercy of Allah. It will benefit them in this life as well as in the life hereafter.

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1. al-Majlisi, Biharul 'Ul-Anwar, vol. 26, p. 170.
 2. al-Majlisi, Biharul 'Ul-Anwar, vol. 26, chap. 1 to chap. 3, pp. 18-976
 3. Ibid, chap. 5, pp. 105-108.
 4. Ibid, vol. 4, p. 130.
 5. The Qur'an, 20: 114.
 6. al-Majlisi, Biharul 'Ul-Anwar, vol. 4, p. 118.

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