

Suratul Baqarah: Verses 30-33

(٣٠) وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً قَالُوا أَتَجْعَلُ فِيهَا مَنْ يُفْسِدُ فِيهَا وَيَسْفِكُ الدِّمَاءَ وَنَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ وَنُقَدِّسُ لَكَ قَالَ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

(٣١) وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا ثُمَّ عَرَضَهُمْ عَلَى الْمَلَائِكَةِ فَقَالَ أَنْبِئُونِي بِأَسْمَاءِ هَؤُلَاءِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

(٣٢) قَالُوا سُبْحَانَكَ لَا عِلْمَ لَنَا إِلَّا مَا عَلَّمْتَنَا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ

(٣٣) قَالَ يَا آدَمُ أَنْبِئْهُمْ بِأَسْمَائِهِمْ فَلَمَّا أَنْبَأَهُمْ بِأَسْمَائِهِمْ قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُلْ لَكُمْ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ غَيْبَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَأَعْلَمُ مَا تُبْدُونَ وَمَا كُنْتُمْ تَكْتُمُونَ

And when your Lord said to the angels, “Verily I am going to make in the earth a vicegerent”; they said: “wilt thou place in it such as shall make mischief in it and shed blood while we celebrate Thy praise and extol Thy holiness?” He said: “Surely I know what you do not know” (30).

And He taught Adam the names, all of them, then presented them to the angels and He said: “Tell Me the names of those if you are right” (31).

They said: “Glory be to Thee! We have no knowledge but that which Thou hast taught us; surely

Thou, Thou (alone), art the knowing, the Wise” (32).

He said: “O Adam! Inform them of their names. And when he had informed them of their names, He said: “Did I not say to you that I surely know the unseen (secrets) of the heavens and the earth and (that) I know what you manifest and what you were hiding?” (33).

Commentary

The verses tell us why the man has been sent to this world, what is the significance of his appointment as the vicegerent of Allah in this earth, what are the characteristics and special features of this vicegerency. Unlike other Qur'anic stories, it has been told in one place only, that is, in these verses.

Qur'an: *And when your Lord said:* We shall explain in vol. IV, what the “speech” or “saying” means when it is attributed to Allah, to angels and to the Satan.

Qur'an: *they said: “Wilt thou place in it such as shall make mischief in it . . . and extol Thy holiness?”:* The angels heard the announcement, “I am going to make in the earth a vicegerent”, and at once arrived at the conclusion that the wouldbe vicegerent would make mischief in the earth and shed blood. Apparently they understood the ultimate behaviour of the said vicegerent from the words, “in the earth”.

A vicegerent appointed in the earth would certainly be created from material components; he would necessarily be bestowed with two basic traits of desire and anger; the earth is a place of unceasing struggle and constant confrontation; its resources are limited, its opportunities finite; but the proposed vicegerent's desire would be unlimited, infinite. The condition of the earth and earthly things was hardly reassuring.

Its creatures were subjected to ever–continuing deterioration and disintegration; its good was always turning into bad; it was a place where an individual could not live without a group having similar characteristics and traits. Keeping all this in view, the angels at once understood that what Allah intended to create was not only an individual, but a species.

The members of that species would have to live together, cooperating with one another; that is to say, they would have to establish a society, a social order. And with a venture like this, they were bound to cause mischief and to shed blood.

On the other hand, they knew that vicegerency – setting one thing in place of another – was unthinkable unless the vicegerent were a true copy of his predecessor in all the characteristics, traits and intrinsic abilities.

The proposed earthly creature was to be made vicegerent of Allah in the earth. Allah has got for Himself the best names, the sublime attributes; His mercy and power are beyond the comprehension of His

creatures; He, in His person, is untouched by any defect; and, in his actions, is free from all kinds of evil and disorder.

How could an earthly vicegerent, with all his defects and deficiencies, represent the majesty and splendour of Allah in the earth? Well, could a lowly creature of earth be a mirror of divine beauty and sublimity?

This was their question – and it was no more than a question. It was not a protest, not an objection; they actually wanted to know the truth. They later asserted their belief that Allah was the Knowing, the Wise.

They believed that what Allah intended to do was based on knowledge and wisdom; and their question was put in order to learn the underlying wisdom of the decision of Allah. What their question – or, pleading – amounted to was as follows:

Allah intends to appoint a vicegerent in the earth; in order that the said vicegerent should represent Allah by celebrating His praise and glorifying His holiness through his worthy presence. But his earthly nature would not let him do so; it would irresistibly pull him towards mischief and wickedness.

So far as the main purpose of this vicegerency – celebrating Allah's praise and glorifying His holiness – is concerned, we are already doing it. Therefore, we are Allah's *de facto* vicegerents; and if Allah wishes, He may bestow upon us this designation. What is the need, then, of a new creation to act as vicegerent of Allah in the earth?

For the reply, Allah used a sentence, “Surely I know what you do not know”, and an action, “And He taught Adam the names, all of them”.

The context shows that:

First: The vicegerent was to get the vicegerency of Allah; he was not to become a successor of any earthly creature that had preceded him. If Allah had wanted the man to take the place of that previous creature, the reply, “And He taught Adam the names, all of them”, would be quite irrelevant.

Assuming that man was given vicegerency of Allah, this prestige would not be restricted to the person of Adam only, his descendants too would be vicegerents of Allah in the earth. Adam was taught the names; in other words, this knowledge was ingrained in human being in such a manner that, since that first day, it has been constantly bearing newer, fresher and better fruits; whenever man gets a chance, he discovers new avenues of knowledge; and thus he always finds himself imbued with previously unknown potentialities that more often than not turn into real achievements. It is a never ending process; it is a wonder that will not cease, and ever-fresh insight that will never fail to astonish.

That this assumption is correct, and the whole mankind is vicegerent of Allah, is evident by the following verses:

And remember (O people of 'Ad!) when He made you successors of Nūh's people . . . (7:69);

Then We made you successors in the land after them . . . (10:14);

. . . and He makes you successors in the earth (27:62).

The word translated here as “successor” is the same that has been translated as “vicegerent” in the verse under discussion.

Second: Allah did not say that the vicegerent–designate would not cause mischief and bloodshed; nor did He reject the plea of the angels that they celebrated His praise and extolled His glory. By this silence, He confirmed that the angels were right on both counts. But then He made manifest one thing which the angels were not aware of.

He showed them that there was a matter which they could not shoulder the responsibility of, while this proposed vicegerent could do so. Man was entrusted with a divine secret which the angels, in their nature, were unable to know or understand. And that divine gift would more than compensate the ensuing mischief and bloodshed.

Allah told them, first, that surely He knew what they did not know. Then He referred to the same reply by telling them: “Did I not say that I surely know the unseen (secrets) of the heavens and the earth?” Looking at the intervening sentences it may easily be understood that the “unseen (secrets)” refer to “the names”.

It does not refer to Adam's knowledge of those names. The angels were unaware of even the existence of these “names”; it was not that they knew about the names but were not sure whether Adam knew them or not.

Had the angels been doubtful only about Adam's knowledge of the names, it would have been enough to tell Adam to inform the angels of the names in order that they would have known that Adam knew.

Instead, Allah first asked them to tell Him “the names of those”. The angels had claimed the vicegerency of Allah for themselves, and had hinted that Adam was not fit for it; but the essential qualification for the vicegerency was the knowledge of the names; therefore, Allah asked both candidates about the names; the angels did not know them, and Adam knew; it proved that he had the qualification while they lacked it.

The question (about this knowledge) addressed to the angels ends with the clause, “if you are right”; it means that they had claimed a position, essential qualification of which was this knowledge.

Qur'an: And He taught Adam the names, all of them, then presented them to the angels:

The Arabic pronoun, “them”, used in “then presented them”, is made for rational beings, those who have

life, sense and understanding. Obviously, the names (or, the named ones) were some living and sensible being who were hidden behind the curtain of the “unseen”.

It follows that the knowledge given to Adam of their names was something totally different from what we understand from the knowledge of names. Merely knowing the names (in the sense known to us) has no distinction; otherwise, the angels too would have become equal to Adam in this respect as soon as they heard those names from Adam.

Also, there would have been no distinction for Adam in such a knowledge. The angels could rightly complain to Allah that He taught those names to Adam, but kept them (i.e. the angels) in dark; had He taught them too, they would have been equal to, if not better than, Adam! Understandably, such favouritism could not have silenced the angels. Surely, it was something deeper than merely knowing all the names.

It would not have been a convincing argument for Allah to teach Adam a dictionary and then put it as an evidence against the angels – the honoured servants who do not precede Him in speech and who act according to His commandment only – telling them to inform Him of the words which they had not been taught, and which the mankind was to invent in future.

Moreover, the only purpose of language is to convey the feelings and ideas to the hearer; but the angels do not need any language for this purpose; they convey and receive the ideas directly without the medium of words; their stage is far higher than that of human beings in this respect.

However, it is clear that the knowledge of the names which the angels got after hearing them from Adam was not the same as Adam had got by teaching of Allah – the inferior knowledge of the names they could grasp, but not the superior one which qualified Adam for vicegerency of Allah.

Adam deserved the vicegerency because he was given the knowledge of the names, and not because he informed the angels of those names. That is why they declared, “Glory be to Thee! We have no knowledge but that which Thou hast taught us”. They accepted that they did not possess that knowledge.

The above discourse leads us to believe that Adam was taught the names of the named ones in such a way that he clearly knew their reality and recognized their substantial existence; it was not merely knowing the semantic value of a noun.

The named ones were substantial realities, the actual beings that were, at the same time, hidden behind the curtain of the unseen (secrets) of the heavens and the earth. This especial knowledge could be learnt only by an earthly human being, but was quite incomprehensible by a heavenly angel. And this knowledge had an intrinsic bearing upon vicegerency.

“al-Asma' ” (الأسماء = the names), in the sentences, “And He taught Adam the names”, is a plural with

the definite article “al” (the) prefixed to it. Grammatically, it denotes generality, comprehensiveness; and it is followed by the emphatic, “all of them”.

Clearly, Adam was taught all the names of every named thing, without any restriction or limitation. As described earlier, the pronoun, “them”, in the clause, “then presented them to the angels”, shows that every name, that is, the named one, was a living being having knowledge and intellect; and at the same time, he was in the curtain of the unseen – the unseen of the heavens and the earth.

“The unseen of the heavens and the earth”: It is a genitive case. Somewhere else this phrase may mean the unseen parts of the heavens and the earth. But in this verse, where Allah intends to demonstrate His perfect and comprehensive power, and to show the deficiency and incapability of the angels, it must mean a secret which is unseen to all the worlds, to all the heavens and the earth; an unseen beyond the sphere of the universe.

If you look at all the particulars of this verse – that “the names” denotes generality, that the named ones were alive and had knowledge, and that they were unseen to the heavens and the earth – you will agree that it perfectly fits on the theme of the verse 15:21,

And there is not a thing but with Us are the treasures of it and We do not send it down but in a known measure.

Whatever is called a thing – whatever is “named” a thing – Allah has its vast treasures, ever-lasting, never-ending, unmeasured by any measure, unlimited by any limit. Measure and limit come to it when it is created and sent down.

The vastness of these treasures is not of the same kind as the multiplicity of number, because a number, no matter how large, is by definition measured, limited and quantified. The said treasures are vast in their ranks and grades. (We shall further explain it in Chapter 15.)

The named ones who were presented before the angels were sublime beings, who were well-protected by Allah, hidden in curtains of the unseen. He sent them down to the universe with their blessings and benefactions, and created all that is in the heavens and in the earth from their light and splendour. Although they had numerous identities, they were not different in their number or in their persons; whatever difference there was, it was in their ranks and grades.

Qur’an: and I know what you manifest and what you were hiding: The sentence stands face to face with the mention of the unseen (secrets) of the heavens and the earth. Probably it refers to those things which are the parts of the heavens and the earth; and in this way both sentences together cover all unseen things – those which are beyond the sphere of the heavens and the earth together with those which are within that sphere.

Instead of saying “and what you hide”, Allah said, “and what you were hiding”. This changed style

shows that there was something hidden especially in respect of Adam and his appointment as vicegerent. Probably it was the incident described in the next verse:

“. . . (the angels) **prostrated except Iblīs. He refused and he showed arrogance, and he was one of the unbelievers**”.

It shows that Iblīs was an unbeliever before then, and that his refusal to prostrate had sprung from that disbelief, which he had kept hidden upto that moment. Obviously, the prostration of the angels and the refusal of Iblīs had happened after Allah had told them, “Surely I know what you do not know”, but before He said to them, “. . . I know what you manifest and what you were hiding” (i.e. the unbelief kept secret by Iblīs). It also explains the reason why the former sentence was changed to, “I surely know the unseen (secrets) of the heavens and the earth”.

Tradition

as-Sadiq (a.s.) said: “The angels could not know what they said (***Wilt Thou place in it such as shall make mischief in it and shed blood***), if they had not (earlier) seen someone who had made mischief in it and shed blood.” (*at-Tafsīr, al-'Ayyash*)

The author says: This tradition may be pointing to an earlier creature that inhabited the earth before the mankind, as some other Tradition say. It is not against what we have said that they understood it from the very words of Allah: ***Verily, I am going to make in the earth a vicegerent***; rather the tradition and our explanation are complementary.

The tradition, without putting it in the framework of our explanation, would show that the angels too, like Iblīs, had committed the folly of unauthorized analogy – a very objectionable practice.

Zurarah said: “I visited Abū Ja'far (a.s.) and he asked (me): 'What do you have of Shū'ah Tradition?' I said: 'I do have a large number of it; and I was thinking of kindling a fire to burn them in it.' He said: 'Hide it (somewhere), you will (naturally) forget what you are not familiar with.'” (Zurarah said):

“Then, I thought about the mankind (and asked him about them). He said: 'How did the angels get their knowledge when they said, ***Wilt Thou place in it such as shall make mischief in it and shed blood?***'”

“Zurarah further reports that whenever Abū 'Abdillah (a.s.) mentioned this tradition, he said: “It is a shattering blow against al-Qadariyyah (i. e. those who say that man is completely independent of Allah in his actions).”

Abū 'Abdillah (a.s.) further said: “Adam (a.s.) had, in the heaven, a friend from among the angels. When Adam got down from the heaven to the earth, the angel felt lonely; he complained (of it) to Allah and sought His permission.

Allah allowed him and he came down to him (Adam); he found him (Adam) sitting in a desolate region. When Adam saw him, he put his hand on his head and cried aloud.” Abū 'Abdillāh (a.s.) said: “They narrate that (it was such a loud cry that) all the creatures heard it.

The angel told him: 'O Adam! I do not see but that you have disobeyed your Lord and put on yourself a burden beyond your strength. Do you know what Allah had told us about you, and (what) we had said in His reply?' (Adam) said: 'No.' (The angel) said: 'Allah told us, “I am going to make in the earth a vicegerent”.

We said: “Wilt Thou place in it such as shall make mischief in it and shed blood?” Thus, He created you to place you in the earth. Could it be right for you to stay in the heaven?’ Abū 'Abdillāh (a.s.) said: “Allah in this way consoled Adam for three days.” (*ibid.*)

The author says: The tradition shows that the Garden of Adam was in the heaven. Other Tradition on this subject will be given later.

In the same book, Abū 'Alī-ʿAbbas is quoted as saying that he asked Abū 'Abdillāh (a.s.) about the words of Allah, **And He taught Adam the names, all of them**, (and enquired) **as to what Allah had taught him**. (The Imam) said: “The earths, the mountains, the canyons and the valleys.” Then he looked at the rug which he sat upon and said: “And this rug is among the things which He taught him.”

It is reported in the same book that al-Fudayl ibn al-ʿAbbas asked Abū 'Abdillāh (a.s.) what were the names which Allah taught Adam. He replied: “The names of the valleys and the vegetables and the trees and the mountains of the earth.”

The same book narrates from Dawūd ibn Sarhan al-ʿAttar that he said: “I was with Abū 'Abdillāh (a. s.) ; he called for the table-spread and we took our meals. Then he called for the washbowl and hand-towel. I said to him:

'May I be your ransom! The words of Allah: **And He taught Adam the names, all of them** – was (this) wash-bowl and hand-towel among them?' He (a.s.) said: 'The mountain-passes and the valleys.' Saying this he pointed by his hand this and that way.”

as-Sadiq (a.s.) said: “Verily, Allah taught Adam the names of His proofs, all of them; then He presented them – and they were the spirits – to the angels, and said: 'Tell Me the names of these if you are right in your claims that you have more right, than Adam, to the vicegerency in the earth because of your glorifying and extolling (Me).'

They said: '**Glory be to Thee! We have no knowledge but that which Thou hast taught us; surely Thou, Thou** (alone), **art the Knowing, the Wise.**' Allah, Blessed and High is He! said: '**O Adam! Inform them of their names.**' When he informed them of their names, they knew of their (i.e. those spirits) high rank before Allah, Great is His name!

They realized that they (i.e. those spirits) were more deserving to be the vicegerents of Allah in His earth, and (to be) His proofs over His creatures. Then Allah removed them (the spirits) from their sight, and subjugated them with their (i.e. those spirits) obedience and love; and told them,

'Did I not say to you that I surely know the unseen (secrets) of the heavens and the earth and (that) I know what you manifest and what you were hiding?'¹

The author says: The meaning of this tradition may be understood from the commentary given earlier; and it may also be realized that there was no contradiction between this tradition and the preceding ones.

It was explained earlier that the verse 15:21 (**And there is not a thing but with Us are the treasures of it . . .**) that every thing originally exists in the treasures of the unseen; the things that are with us came into being on descending from there. The name given to a thing in this existence is in fact the name of that which is hidden in the treasures of the unseen.

You may say that Allah taught Adam every thing that was in His treasures of the unseen – unseen that was hidden from the heavens and the earth. The same idea may be conveyed in these words: Allah taught Adam the names of all things – the things that were unseen secrets hidden from the heavens and the earth. The sum total of both statements is the same.

It is not out of place here to point to the Tradition of *at-taynah* (التَّيْنَةُ = the substance, of which a thing is made). Such a tradition, narrated in *Biharul '1-anwar*, is as follows:

Jabir ibn 'Abdillah said: "I said to the Apostle of Allah (s.a.w.a.): 'What was the first thing which Allah created?' He said 'The light of your prophet, O Jabir! Allah created it, then created from it every good; then He caused it to stand before Him in the station of "nearness", so long as Allah wished.

Then He divided it into parts; and He created the Throne from one part, and the Chair from another part, and the bearers of the Throne and the occupiers of the Chair from yet another part; and He placed the fourth part in the station of love, as long as Allah wished.

Then He divided it into parts; and He created the Pen from one part, and the Tablet from another part, and the Garden from yet another part; and He placed the fourth part in the station of fear, as long as Allah wished.

Then He divided it into portions, and He created the angels from one portion, and the sun from another portion, and the moon from yet another portion, and He placed the fourth portion in the station of hope, as long as Allah wished.

Then He divided it into portions, and He created the understanding from one portion, and the knowledge and forbearance from another portion, and the (divine) protection and help from yet other portion, and He placed the fourth portion in the station of modesty as long as Allah wished.

Then He looked at it with awe-inspiring eye, and that Light started perspiring, and one hundred and twenty-four thousand drops dropped from it; and Allah created from each drop the soul of a prophet and apostle. Then the souls of the prophets began breathing, and Allah created from their breasts the souls of (His) friends and the martyrs and the good ones.' ”

The author says: There are numerous Tradition of the same type; and on deep pondering they support what we have written earlier; some of them will be discussed later on. You should not reject such Tradition outright, thinking that they were forged by the S^hif^hs.

The wonders of the creation are unfathomable; the scientists and the philosophers have spent, and are spending, their lives in discovering some of its secrets; but every solved enigma brings in its wake a lot of fresh previously unthought of enigmas.

Do not forget that this is the unfathomability of this physical world – the smallest in range, the narrowest in scope, the lowest in rank. How can we pass judgement about other worlds beyond this one – the worlds of light, spaciousness and abundance?

1. Ma'ani '1-akhbar

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