

Suratul Baqarah: Verse 34

(٣٤) وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِآدَمَ فَسَجَدُوا إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ أَبَىٰ وَاسْتَكْبَرَ وَكَانَ مِنَ الْكَافِرِينَ

And when We said to the angels: “Prostrate before Adam”, then all prostrated except Iblīs. He refused and he showed arrogance and he was one of the unbelievers (34).

General Comment

It has been explained earlier that the preceding words, “and what you were hiding”, show that there was a hidden thing that had, meanwhile, come into open. The last sentence of this verse too leads to the same conclusion. Instead of saying, “He refused and he showed arrogance, and he disbelieved”, it says, “. . . he was one of the unbelievers”.

It was not that he became an unbeliever at that moment; he was an unbeliever long since, but had kept it a secret, and this event brought it into open. Also, it was mentioned that the event of the prostration of the angels must have happened between the divine words, “Surely I know what you do not know”, and the words, “. . . I know what you manifest and what you were hiding”. It may be asked: Why then has Allah put this verse after those words?

Probably it has been done just to create a link between the stories of creation of Adam and his being placed in the Paradise. The twelve verses (28–39) were revealed to describe how and when man was made vicegerent of Allah, how was he sent down to the earth, and what is to happen to him in this life – the happenings that will have a bearing on his lasting happiness or unhappiness.

For this theme, the event of prostration has not much importance – except as a connecting link. That is why it has been mentioned here only briefly without going into details. Perhaps, it is because of the same reason that the Qur'an has changed the pronouns referring to Allah from the third person (**your**

Lord said) to the first (**And when We said**).

The angels had not hidden anything from Allah; it was Iblīs who had done so. Then why did Allah ascribe this deed to all of them (*you were hiding*)? Allah in this talk used the same method which even the human beings have adopted for their own speeches; we ascribe the work of an individual to the whole group, if the doer is not properly identified or if he tries to remain anonymous.

Also, there may be another explanation for it. Apparently the first announcement, “I am going to make in the earth a vicegerent”, had shown that the said vicegerent would have authority over the angels too. It may be inferred from the command obliging them to prostrate before Adam.

Probably on hearing that first announcement some disturbing thought had come into their minds, as it had never occurred to them that any earthly creature could be given authority over everything including themselves. Some Tradition too point to it. In this context the words, “what you were hiding”, could easily be addressed to the angels.

Commentary

Qur'an: “Prostrate before Adam”: Apparently it shows that prostration, *per se*, may be done before other than Allah, if it is done in conformity with Allah's command, as a mark of respect to that person. A similar case is found in the story of Yūsuf (a.s.):

And he raised his parents upon the throne and they (all) fell down in prostration before him, and he said: “O my father! this is the interpretation of my vision of old; my Lord has indeed made it to be true” (12: 100).

This topic needs some clarification.

It was explained in the chapter of The Opening what the worship means. The worshipper places himself in the position of servitude and performs what manifests this status, what clearly shows that he accepts the mastership of his master.

Those acts must be such as to show the master's mastership or the servant's servitude; for example, prostrating before the master, bowing down to him, standing before him when he sits, walking behind him when he walks etc.

The more apt an action is to show this status, the more reserved it becomes to the rites of the divine worship. Prostration is the most significant symbol of the master's status and the servant's low rank, because the man in this act falls down and puts his forehead on the ground. For this reason, it has the strongest connection with the divine worship.

However, prostration is not the same thing as worship. They have two different meanings, and worship is

not a quidditative substance of prostration. A quidditative characteristic can never be separated from any being. But prostration may be done without any thought of reverence or worship – for example, just to make fun of someone.

Keeping this in view, it may safely be said that although the connection of prostration with divine worship is the strongest, that worship is not its quiddity. Therefore, prostration, *per se*, cannot be exclusively reserved for Allah. If there is any impediment or obstruction, it should emanate from the *sharḥ* or the reason.

What the *sharḥ* and the reason forbid is ascribing the prerogatives of the lordship to anyone other than Allah. But they do not forbid honouring someone or according him respect when it is done without elevating him to godhead.

The discourse given above was from purely academic point of view. But the religious good taste, conditioned as it is by rituals of worship, has strictly reserved the prostration for divine worship; it should not be done for anyone other than Allah; in Islam, one is forbidden to prostrate before others even as a mark of respect.

Apart from prostration, there is no proof – either from the Qur'an and tradition or from reason and logic – against according respect and showing reverence to others than Allah, especially when it is done as a part of the love of Allah; examples may be given of revering and loving the good servants of Allah and paying respects to the graves of the friends of Allah or to the things attributed to them.

There is no reason whatsoever why such actions should be prohibited. (We shall deal with this subject in a more appropriate place, God willing.)

Tradition

Abū 'Abdillah (a.s.) said: “When Allah created Adam and ordered the angels to prostrate before him, it came into the angels' mind: 'We never thought that Allah had created any creature more honourable than us; we are His neighbours, and we are the nearest of His creation to Him.'”

Thereupon Allah said: 'Did I not say to you that I know what you manifest and what you were hiding?' – (it was) a reference to what they had mentioned concerning the affairs of the *jinn*, and had concealed what was in their own minds. So, the angels, who had said what they had said, took refuge with the Throne.”
(*at-Tafsīr, al-'Ayyash*)

Another tradition of the same theme is narrated in the same book from 'Alī ibn al-Husayn (a.s.), the last part of which runs as follows: “When the angels realized that they had fallen into error, they took refuge with the Throne; and it was a group of the angels – and they were those who were around the Throne; it was not all the angels (who had thought so). . . So, they have taken refuge with the Throne till the Day of Resurrection.”

The author says: The theme of the two Tradition may be inferred from the talk of the angels: “We celebrate Thy praise and extol Thy holiness”; and “Glory be to Thee! We have no knowledge but that which Thou hast taught us; surely Thou, Thou (alone), art the Knowing, the Wise.”

It will be explained later that the Throne means the divine knowledge, as the Tradition narrated from the Imams of *Ahlu 'l-bayt* (a.s.) say. (Therefore, the angels' taking refuge with the Throne would refer to their confession that they knew only that which Allah had taught them and that only Allah was the Knowing, the Wise.)

According to some Tradition, the word “the unbelievers”, (in the clause, “and he was one of the unbelievers”) refers to the species, *jinn*, to which Iblīs belonged, and which was created before man. Allah says:

And certainly We created man of clay that gives forth sound, of black mud fashioned into shape. And the jinn We created before of intensely hot fire (15:26–27).

According to the above-mentioned Tradition, the attribution of hiding to the angels (*what you were hiding*) needs no explanation; the clause means exactly what it says; the angels had actually hidden in their hearts the idea of their supremacy.

A third, group of Tradition says that the said clause refers to Iblīs and his hidden thought that he would not make obeisance to Adam and would not prostrate before him if asked to do so.

There is no contradiction between these various explanations, because all the meanings may be inferred from the Qur'anic verses. They are all true and based on fact. Various Tradition throw light on various facets of the same fact.

Abū Basīr said: “I said to Abū 'Abdillah (a. s.): 'Did the angels prostrate and put their foreheads on the earth?' He said: 'Yes, as an honour (bestowed on him) by Allah.' ” (*Qisasu 'l-anbiya, ar-Rawandī*)

The Imam said: “Verily the prostration of the angels before Adam was in obedience to Allah and for their love of Adam.” (*Tuhafu 'l-luqā'i*)

Mūsā ibn Ja'far (peace be on them both) narrates through his forefathers that a Jew asked Amru 'l-mu'minīn 'Alī (a.s.) about the miracles of the Prophet in comparison with the miracles of (other) prophets (in course of which) he said: “This is Adam before whom Allah ordered His angels to prostrate.” “Did He do any thing like it for Muhammad?”

'Alī (a. s.) said: “It was so. But Allah ordered His angels to prostrate before Adam; yet their prostration was not a prostration of worship; (it was not) that they had worshipped Adam against Allah, Mighty and Great is He! It was rather as an acknowledgement of Adam's superiority and a mercy of Allah towards him.

And Muhammad (s.a.w.a.) was given what was better than that. Verily Allah, Great and High is He!,

blessed him in His omnipotence, and the angels, all of them, prayed for him, and the believers were obliged to pray for him. So this is the increase, O Jew! ”(*al-Ihtijaj*)

Allah created Adam, and he remained for forty years in (that) shape (i.e. a statue without life). And Iblīs, the cursed, used to pass by him and say: “Why have you been created?” al-‘Alīm (i.e. al-Kazim – a.s.) said: “Then Iblīs said: ‘If Allah ordered me to prostrate before this, I would certainly disobey Him.

’ . . . Then Allah said to the angels, ‘Prostrate before Adam!’; all of them prostrated; but Iblīs showed the envy that was in his heart and he refused to prostrate.” (*at-Tafsīr, al-Qummī*)

Biharul ‘l-anwar narrates, quoting from *Qisasul ‘l-anbiya’*, as-Sadiq (a.s.) that he said: “Iblīs was ordered to prostrate before Adam, and he said: ‘O my Lord! By Thy honour! If Thou excusest me from prostrating before Adam, I would certainly worship Thee worship no one would ever have worshipped Thee in a like manner.’ Allah, Great is His glory!, said: ‘I like to be worshipped according to My own pleasure.’ ”

The Imam also said: “Verily Iblīs cried aloud four times: First, on the day he was cursed, and the day he was dropped down to the earth, and the day Muhammad (s.a.w.a.) was sent (as prophet) after a (long) interval of the apostles, and when the source of the Book was sent down. And he snorted (in satisfaction) twice: when Adam ate from the tree and when he (Adam) was sent down from the Garden.”

And he said about the words of Allah:

so their nakedness appeared unto them (20: 121):

“Their nakedness was not seen before, then it was uncovered.”

Also he said: “The tree from which Adam was forbidden (to eat) was the spikenard.”

The author says: The Tradition – and there are many – support what we have written about prostration.

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