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Part 3: An Awareness of the Meaning of the Words in the Qur`an

Knowledge of the meaning of the individual words of the Qur`an is one of the fundamental prerequisites for the commentary of the Qur`an, since understanding compounded word is only possible after comprehending its original components.

At this point, it is imperative to note that we must never rely upon the common meaning that we perceive of a word, which is in our minds, and explain the verse according to that interpretation. How often have we seen that with the passing of time, the meaning of a word completely changes and the common definition (of a particular word) which was well known during the time of the revelation may later undergo a change.

Therefore, we must go forth and study the root meaning of the word and seek to acquire its original denotation, and only then can we proceed to explain a verse of the Qur`an.

For example the words “عصى” and “غوى”, in the common understanding of today means ‘he sinned’ and ‘he deviated’, whereas the original meaning of these two words (during the time of revelation of the Qur`an) was different from the meanings that we commonly perceive today.

We observe a group of people who prove the fallibility of the prophets by the following verse:

وَ عَصَىٰ آدَمُ رَبَّهُ فَغَوَىٰ

“Thus did Adam distance himself from his Lord, and perform an action which had no benefit to it.”¹

They assume that the words “عصى” and “غوى” mean the same today as they did during the time of

the revelation. However if the original meaning of these two words was searched out, people would definitely see that they have different (original) meanings than what is in the minds of the people today, which have been derived from the original meaning of these two words. However, the original meaning of these two words was never associated with the technical meaning of sinning!

The best book available which is able to guide us in finding the original meaning of the words contained in the Qur`an is the work *al-Maqayis*, written by Ahmad b. Faris b. Zakariyya (d. 395 ah). This work has been printed in six volumes in Egypt and the author's entire endeavor in compiling this work was to bring forth the original meaning of the words of the Qur`an and to make them available to us. Then he shows to us how the meanings of the words have changed with the passing of time and have appeared in the form of an independent meaning (with a loose affiliation to the original meaning), in addition to possessing its own original meaning.

Today, in the various Arabic dictionaries, we see that there are some words which have ten meanings to them and a person may actually think that a particular word has actually been formed to mean all ten things and actually has ten meanings to it! However, when a person refers to the work *al-Maqayis*, it would then be made clear to him that the word he is studying does not have more than one meaning associated with it and all other meanings are simply different facets of the original meaning, which, due to the passage of time, have been attributed to that word and taken as independent meanings.

In addition to the book *al-Maqayis*, the true commentator of the Qur`an must also refer to books such as, *al-Mufradat fi Gharib al-Qur`an*, written by Abul Qasim Husayn b. Muhammad, popularly known as Raghīb al-Isfahani (d. 502 ah) and the work, *an-Nihayah fi Gharib al-Hadith wal Athar*, written by Majd ad-Din Abul Saf`dat Mubarak b. Muhammad Jazri, better known as Ibne Athir (d. 606 ah) if he wants to be able to differentiate the various meanings of the words in the Qur`an.

This last book mentioned has been printed in Egypt in six volumes and even though this work looks at the words contained in the ahadith, however we are able to use this work in the commentary of the Qur`an as well.

In addition, the work *Majma' al-Bahrain*, written by Turayhi al-Najafi (d. 1086 ah) is also a very beneficial work on the commentary of the words (contained in the Qur`an).

1. Surat Taha (20), Verse 121

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