

Foreword

Speech, and the ability to communicate through conversation is one of the wonders of creation. It is through this bounty and faculty that human beings are able to form relationships with one another; whatever a person wishes to convey is effortlessly drawn out from the recesses of his mind and shared with others through speech.

Similarly, the listener is also able to use the same channel to put across his own responses and explain his thoughts and ideas to his audience. Therefore, words and phrases manifest the intent of a speaker and are the means by which he communicates with his fellows.

In some ways, God's speech is similar; however, understanding the intended meaning of God's words in the Qur'an – which has been the source of the biggest transformation in the history of man – requires deep thought and reflection. This reflection should be unsullied by suggestion, adulteration and preconceived ideas because these verses have issued from an infinite source of wisdom and its sacred messages are directed towards an unassailable and firm reality, which is the God Almighty. Indeed the rays of Divine knowledge illuminate the entirety of creation.

Since God's verses are primarily addressed to mankind, its lofty and unassailable meanings have to be somewhat reduced in complexity in a manner that takes into account the limits of human intellect, ability and knowledge, so that the intricate realities that they contain may be commonly understood. Perhaps it is for this reason that God Almighty uses the term "*nuzul*" (descent) when He refers to His speech.

The first receptacle for the descent of revelation was the sacred heart of the last Messenger (S) and he was the only human able to withstand revelation directly from its source, and qualified to understand its content:

فَإِنَّهُ نَزَّلَهُ عَلَى قَلْبِكَ بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَهُدًى وَبُشْرَى لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ

For surely he (Jibra'il) revealed it to your heart by Allah's command, verifying that which is before

it and guidance and good news for the believers (al-Baqara, 2/97)

As for the rest of mankind to whom God's words are addressed, they learn the Qur'anic verses from the Prophet (S). This is a further stage of simplification and descent so that the verses are better understood.

In the Qur'an, God Almighty has set forth concepts and realities that appeal to the differing levels of human intellect and thought, and its messages become even more radiant with the evolution of man's knowledge.

A great thinker like Mulla Sadra derives from the following Qur'anic verse, the concept of *burhan al-siddiqin*¹ in his thesis on *hikmat al-muta'aliya* (transcendent philosophy):

سُرِّيهِمْ آيَاتِنَا فِي الْأَفَاقِ وَفِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ

We will soon show them Our signs in the Universe and in their own souls, until it will become quite clear to them that it is the truth. (Fussilat, 41/53)

Similarly, other readers can also draw inferences from this verse about the realities of *tawhid* according to their individual level of understanding and intellect.

God continually urges His servants to reason and ponder over the verses of the Qur'an – which is the richest and most complete source of knowledge at the disposal of mankind – and categorically prescribes that the truth be sought through deep contemplation.

Therefore to understand the words of God scholars more than anyone else are exposed to the limitless knowledge contained in His speech. It's fascinating attraction in various dimensions draws them to benefit from it in proportion to their intellectual competencies.

Due to the vastness of its spiritual treasures, Muslim scholars in different eras have offered a variety of opinions about the contents of the Qur'an. Of course, such a great and unlimited source cannot be imagined to be a product of information that existed at the time of revelation because it contains information about the secrets of creation and external events that was not possible for an individual to know at that time.

The Qur'an states:

أَفَلَا يَتَدَبَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ أَمْ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبٍ أَقْفَالُهَا

Do they not then reflect on the Qur'an? Or are there locks on their hearts? (Muhammad, 47/24)

The three terms, “*tadabbur*” (reflection), “*qulub*” (hearts) and “*aqfal*” (locks), demonstrate the special place of the Qur'an, this eternal miracle, in the lives of mankind. The verses of the Qur'an invite man to ponder deeply so that he may have access to the best policies, undo the shackles of ignorance and unawareness and illuminate the heart. They urge him to study nature to its limits so that he may explore the frontiers of what lies beyond.

The aim of the Qur'an is not to solve the diverse issues of human inquiry because these topics are out of the scope of a book of guidance. However, motivated by the Qur'an, which warmly praises the written word and the amassing of knowledge, creative and enthusiastic nations who have come to possess amazing knowledge and distinction were inspired. And great transformations that led in turn to other changes are indebted to this very message espoused by the Qur'an.

The Qur'an elevates the outlook of man to an extent that he is able to journey from the known and apparent to the shores of that which is unknown and hidden and in this manner begin to unravel the mysteries of creation which are of crucial importance to mankind.

The objective that the Qur'an seeks is that of the guidance and nurturing of man in all facets of his existence so that he may move towards achieving nobility. The only way man can acquire perfection is by nurturing his soul, transforming his inner self, and achieving distinctions in the different dimensions of his being by following the directives of God contained in the Qur'an. In this manner the fundamental role of the Qur'an and the system of values it espouses becomes clear.

We must take note that the invitation to ponder over its verses comes from the Qur'an itself. This sacred book, unlike ordinary books which are only concerned with information and inquiry about one subject, tackles a diverse variety of themes, ranging from Divine gnosis, legal precepts, social and individual organisation, rights and politics, morals, manners and history, articles of worship, and scores of other matters. On the other hand, the Qur'an is an integrated unit with every part of it conforming to the rest of its principles and laws. Studying one principle can provide the key to unlocking another principle and this unique and exclusive quality highlights the essential miraculous nature of this rich fountain of guidance.

For this reason, one must not adopt a narrow-minded approach to the exegesis of the Divine revelation by imagining it to be static and inert and content oneself with the opinions of the scholars of former times; rather, there must be a constant research and new exegesis as times change. Indeed, it has been reported that the great Qur'anic exegete Allama Tabataba'i has stated, “A new commentary and exegesis of the Qur'an which is commensurate with the needs of the time with regards to the Qur'an must be published at least once in every ten years.”

What is acceptable in the exegesis of the Qur'an is an expression of views derived from contemplation on its verses and intelligent interpretations based on sound reasoning; what is unacceptable is embarking on the false path of personal interpretation (*tafsir bi'l ray*) based on whimsical exegesis

instead of sound explanations, which will only pull mankind towards perdition.

Over the years, researchers and many scholars and pious individuals have worked tirelessly to better understand the verses of the Qur'an, thereby opening avenues to reach the lofty heights of the Qur'anic wisdom. In contemporary times also, intellectuals and scientists must direct their efforts to research at various levels to uncover the realities contained in the verses of the Qur'an, and to benefit from this ultimate and concise source of principles of knowledge and wisdom, whose qualities cannot be overstated. The vast expanse of human endeavour can certainly reveal the hidden treasures of the Qur'an and extract the deeper and loftier meanings of God's words.

Indeed, the sea of God's words is boundless; the deeper we will search in this vast ocean, the more radiant and valuable jewels will come to hand. The Qur'an sates:

قُلْ لَوْ كَانَ الْبَحْرُ مِدَادًا لِكَلِمَاتِ رَبِّي لَنَفِدَ الْبَحْرُ قَبْلَ أَنْ تَنْفَدَ كَلِمَاتُ رَبِّي وَلَوْ
جِئْنَا بِمِثْلِهِ مَدَدًا

Say: If the sea were ink for the words of my Lord, the sea would surely be consumed before the words of my Lord are exhausted, though We were to bring the like of that (sea) to add. (al-Kahf, 18/109)

This work is a small step in the realization of the objectives that were discussed. However, before we embark on the main discussion, two important points must be borne in mind:

1. It is evident that the wings of human thought can never scale the heights of the lofty and esoteric mysteries of the Qur'an and that which is mentioned as "the hidden insights in God's word" are inferences that have come to the mind of the author. These views, just like the rest of the opinions and commentaries about the verses of the Qur'an cannot be stated with certainty to be the meaning intended by God; rather, every deduction made from the sacred verses, after the appropriate exposition, must be qualified by the well-known phrase, "wallahu ya'lam" (and God knows best).
2. By presenting a differing viewpoint from that of the exegetes about the subjects that will be discussed, it is not intended to suggest that the opinions of those great scholars are invalid. This is because, as we indicated, the intention is to study some verses from a different angle and the author is looking at the contents of the verses under review in a special manner that takes into account the thoughts of these scholars. In the course of establishing the validity of these views, it will be necessary to consider respectfully the valuable opinions and ideas of the great exegetes and to acknowledge their intellectual and special status.

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1. Literally, “the argument of the veracious”, an ontological proof for the existence of God.

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