

An Exposition of the Verse of Light (Ayat al-Nur)

اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ مِثْلُ نُورِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ الْمِصْبَاحُ فِي زُجَاجَةٍ الزُّجَاجَةُ كَأَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ دُرِّيٌّ يُوقَدُ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ مُبَارَكَةٍ زَيْتُونَةٍ لَا شَرْقِيَّةٍ وَلَا غَرْبِيَّةٍ يَكَادُ زَيْتُهَا يُضِيءُ وَلَوْ لَمْ تَمْسَسْهُ نَارٌ نُورٌ عَلَى نُورٍ يَهْدِي اللَّهُ لِنُورِهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth; a likeness of His light is as a niche in which is a lamp, the lamp is in a glass, (and) the glass is as it were a brightly shining star, lit from a blessed olive-tree, neither eastern nor western, the oil whereof almost gives light though fire touch it not – light upon light – Allah guides to His light whom He pleases, and Allah sets forth parables for men, and Allah is Cognizant of all things. (al-Nur, 24/35)

Whenever there is a discussion about achieving a complete and comprehensive knowledge of God, the Sublime, we acknowledge that the human being will have to admit his incapacity and inadequacy to perceive that Exalted Reality, which is the only Reality in the realm of existence.

The limited reach of the human intellect is not powerful enough to make judgements in the Divine sphere, or to unravel God's unfathomable secrets or to reach an understanding about such an Exalted Being, by study and deliberation. Even if man was to extend his imagination and thought to their limits or to use his formidable powers of reason – which are able to reveal the mysteries of the entire natural world – to deliberate and consult with his fellows, he still would not have the requisite tools to reach his objective. It is for this reason that even the most elaborate explanations fall well short of describing His Being, because whatever man can understand from nature and science is created by God in the first place, and is a product of His command and will.

Our limited intellects are likewise quite unable to acquire a sound understanding of the nature of His attributes for the reason that when assigned to the Source of existence, attributes are quite different from when they are ascribed to other beings. And above all, they are concepts imagined and concocted by human minds, which are themselves prisoners of material boundaries, because all that which can be considered in the realms of human thought is characterized by limitations, and the reach and judgement of the intellect is likewise constrained and man's knowledge despite his many advances is quite inadequate, while God is Infinite and Absolute.

However, even as we acknowledge our inability and powerlessness to gain a perfect understanding and deep and expansive gnosis of the limitless Being, nevertheless we are able to achieve a degree of proximity and a relative understanding of His Exalted station and *tawhid*.

Even when man's intellect and thought are not yet fully developed to his highest potential, he is still able to use his wondrous power of contemplation – which is a bounty derived from the command of that same limitless Source, which He has placed in our souls so that we might seek a way to Him and to try to understand Him – and to use logic and rational proofs and acquire some understanding of that Eternal Being, in proportion to the extent of our individual insight and intellect. In this way, we may fully realize the existence of that constant Reality, Whose will is mirrored throughout the breadth of existence and creation, behind everything that we observe.

One of the most intricate verses of the Qur'an is the verse of light (*ayat al-nur*), which exegetes, mystics and philosophers have all discussed, and about which they have offered opinions according to their respective inclinations.

Undoubtedly, the most satisfying method of explaining unfamiliar phenomena is by the use of allegory, metaphor and simile; in truth this style of introduction and familiarization with truths, comprises of two important and basic aspects: the first is that the beauty and subtlety latent in the metaphor makes the heart of the listener incline to the object being described, and second, the intricate secrets and mysteries of the object may become better known to the listener through the aid of the metaphor and allegory that is employed. The verse above also falls under the category of allegory, however, only to the extent of the reach of the intellective faculty of man, and the insignificant knowledge that he possesses and on the other hand, attempting to introduce the boundless and sacred existence of God.

It must not remain unsaid that even though in their commentaries of this verse, the great Muslim exegetes have not mentioned the main points that we will discuss later, nevertheless what they have presented about the concepts contained in the verse, and their discussions and expositions of its various aspects comprises of deep and subtle points that conform to the inner aspect of the Qur'an and based on the perceptions of researchers they are coherent and plausible.

However, the points that we will presently discuss may be classified as an alternate possible explanation of the verse of the light.

اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ

Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth;

That Sublime Existence who encompasses all the stations of perfection at once; His sacred Light embraces the entirety of existence and illuminates the heavens and the earth. He is the all-Knowing Creator whose eternal radiance infuses life in the creation and bestows assistance to them. He controls, nurtures and completes them through His power; the Light of His existence shines forth and is clearly manifest across the expanse of existence.

No corner of the cosmos can be conceived which the Light of His sacred Essence does not illuminate; however, each being prospers from this light according to its capacity and ability, ranging from the basic capacities to the vast benefits that man gathers for his own betterment and to reach the peaks of human perfection, which is the main objective of the Divine care.

To prepare the minds of the listeners so that they understand the issue better, God explains His light with the following simile:

مَثَلُ نُورِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ الْمِصْبَاحُ فِي زُجَاجَةٍ الزُّجَاجَةُ كَأَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ
دُرِّيٌّ

A likeness of His light is as a niche in which is a lamp, the lamp is in a glass, (and) the glass is as it were a brightly shining star,

The Qur'an which is the most fundamental source for acquiring the cognition of God and for deriving clear guidance about the path that humanity must traverse in order to reach the Originator of existence, compares the Divine light to the simplest object that guides man and illuminates his path in the depths of darkness: a lamp. The first question that arises here is that, why did God not compare His light to the most brilliant and luminous object in the world, that is, the sun, which besides its grandeur and radiance, produces many effects and benefits for the inhabitants of the earth? Why has the Light of God been compared to a man-made lamp instead?

It must be stated in reply that:

Firstly, the sun, with all its illumination, benefits and effects on living beings is still only one of the creations of God in the system of the universe; it is merely carrying out the task it was designed for. If God compared His light with that of the sun, it would indicate a diminution from the state of the Creator to the level of the created, and this is contrary to the exalted nature of God, whose Power extends over

all His creation; an ordinary believer when walking through nature and pondering over these same celestial phenomena and the objective behind their creation will be able to acknowledge and infer His existence.

Secondly, a believer, an unbeliever and every human being, irrespective of his beliefs and convictions, seeks and receives the same benefit from the sun, while the brilliant Light of God only illuminates the pages of the hearts of the believers, and His eternal radiance polishes the minds and beings of the people of cognition and bestows upon them hope and mercy, which are the sources of contentment for the soul; He does not extend the same bounty to the hearts of the unbelievers, who are imprisoned by their veils of darkness.

Now why has the Light of God been compared to a lamp, despite it being an object designed by man, and moreover, its light can only illuminate a very limited area – while the light of the sun illuminates and shines over a large expanse of the earth?

The reply is as follows: All the characteristics of the lamp that have been mentioned in the verse have neither been manufactured by God so that it is a creation of the Creator, nor do they quite resemble a similar man-made device, because the brightness of this radiant lamp and its unique qualities which cannot be found in the expanse of existence, has been taken as the basis of the similitude.

The similitude of God's light to that of a lamp:

مَثَلُ نُورِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ

A likeness of His light is as a niche in which is a lamp can be studied from this perspective.

If a person wants to travel a certain distance in pitch darkness, he must first procure a lamp so that he can illuminate the path ahead of him and through the aid of the light he may not lose his way and thus reach his destination safely. It would be insensible and ill-advised to set off on a journey in total darkness and travel across hills and valleys and still consider oneself needless of a light by which to illuminate the way.

In order to travel on the path of truth and to avoid the darkness of the heart and mind and to finally be protected from going astray, one needs another light, and that is the guidance that illuminates the path of useful thought and discovering the truth.

If man is intent on seeking salvation, he must make himself concordant with the constant journeying of creation and people who are travelling in anticipation of the inevitable meeting with the Lord (*liqa' Allah*), so that he may one day reach the exalted vicinity of God and set foot on the Divine threshold; this means attaining every peak of his potential and it cannot be achieved except by travelling with the aid of

Divine illumination towards his infinite Essence.

Now, what could the glass that encloses and protects the lamp, as mentioned in the verse, possibly denote? The function of the glass is to shield the light from being extinguished by the forces of winds and storms; the persistence, survival and luminance of the light depend upon the glass and its continual presence as a protective device against the elements.

Just as the continuation of the light is linked to the presence of the glass, which acts as a protective barrier, the Light of God is similarly continually dependent on His eternal Existence. Since this light originates from His Sacred Essence, which abides forever, and is not subject to any change, its illumination also is linked to the infinite and subsists eternally. Thus, His Essence infuses the universe with life, while His Light illuminates it (with guidance).

Thereafter, the verse talks of the transparency of the protective glass which projects the light forth like a sparkling star, because the transparent glass does not inhibit the transmission of the light in the least; but at the same time, the presence of the glass forms a barrier that will prevent man from accessing the source of the light. It is possible that the brilliant protective barrier that projects the light is an allusion to the high ranking angels and the bearers of God's throne ('*arsh*).

The Qur'an states:

الَّذِينَ يَحْمِلُونَ الْعَرْشَ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهُ يُسَبِّحُونَ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ

Those who bear the power and those around Him celebrate the praise of their Lord (al-Ghafir, 40/6)

And at the same time the existence of the angels themselves is full of radiance:

كَأَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ دُرِّيٌّ

As if it were a brightly shining star, (al-Nur, 24/35)

When we consider the bearers of the throne as a similitude to the glass that encloses the light, we reach the conclusion that in this metaphor, because the glass acts a barrier preventing man from gaining access to the source of the illumination, the angels are also located in four walls forming an impenetrable barrier. Man, who is a material being, cannot penetrate into the realm of immaterial beings like the angels, never mind the Source of the Divine light itself, the profoundness of whose Essence is beyond all comprehension, thought and sensation.

The Commander of the Faithful, Ali (A) declares in this regard: “[Praise be to Him Whom]...the flights of intellect cannot reach” (*wa la yanaluhu ghaws al-fitan*).¹

According to the foregoing, the idea of the glass that enclosed the light is to radiate the light for the benefit of man. The bearers of the throne (*‘arsh*) and those that inhabit the Divine threshold similarly are conduits through which the Divine effusion and grace flows from His sacred Essence towards mankind.

Furthermore, just as people benefit from the light of a lamp that is situated next to them, God too is close to man, not just beside him but closer to him than his life-vein (jugular):

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ وَنَعْلَمُ مَا تُوَسْوِسُ بِهِ نَفْسُهُ وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ الْوَرِيدِ

And certainly We created man, and We know what his mind suggests to him, and We are nearer to him than his life-vein (Qaf, 50/16)

We also observe plainly that the closer a light is to a person, the more he is able to benefit from its luminance; now since God, the Exalted, is closer to the human being than every other source of illumination – closer to him than even than his own jugular vein – His radiant Light transports hearts and minds to the realms of enlightenment and cognition, allowing man to observe many truths.

In this lamp, there is oil that has been derived from the bounteous olive tree, which possesses the exclusive quality that it is not situated at the “east or west” of the orchard. Perhaps this phrase has been used to indicate the fact that since the east is the location of sunrise and the west is the location of the sunset, when the verse states that it is “not eastern”, it means to imply that the illumination of that Infinite being is not one that rises, or in other words, has a point of origination. Similarly it is “not western”, meaning that it is not an illumination that ever wanes, or in other words, it has no point of termination either. It is eternal. Just as the Creator of the universe subsists eternally, so does the illumination that perpetually flows from the Infinite Source.

Even though the apparent attribution of the description, “neither eastern nor western” seems to be directed at the olive tree, the particular and special implications of the phrase employed can be used to further explain the illumination of the immaculate Essence of God.

Some exegetes have suggested that the phrase, “neither eastern nor western” has been used to denote that the light of God illuminates the east and west of the world. This view does not apparently conform to the latent meaning of the verse, because the question arises, “if it means the east and west of the world, then what about the north and south and other areas?”

While we know that the illumination of the Reality that has been present in every epoch and in every land encompasses every part in existence. The radiance of His light continually illuminates each atom in

the cosmos; therefore, the intended meaning of God's words here is not a geographical reference, because His exalted existence is free from such constraints.

يَكَادُ زَيْتُهَا يُضِيءُ وَلَوْ لَمْ تَمْسَسْهُ نَارٌ

The oil whereof almost gives light though fire touch it not (al-Nur, 24/35)

Every light that exists in the universe has the feature that in order to become luminous, it requires a spark to initially set it alight and work its effect. The factor that sets it alight has a fundamental role; however the Light of God is the exception. His Light is independent of every factor from the view that light only originates from His Sacred Essence, and this is a unique because His attributes, particulars and distinctions are contained within Himself and no excellence can be imagined to be other than a Perfect Existence; in other words, His Light is not other than His Essence.

نُورٌ عَلَى نُورٍ

Light upon light (al-Nur, 24/35)

It is correct that His Light is Absolute and no limit or boundary exists for it; however in the stages of exposure, its manifestation is relative to the capacities and merits of the recipients. As man ascends to higher and higher levels of recognition in *tawhid*, he likewise benefits from further illumination in his spiritual course:

This part of the verse is also an analogy for this very meaning because after bestowing the gift of life, God guides His deserving creatures towards the perfection of their potentials by granting them of other bounties and makes them the recipients of His guidance.

That which leads man to ultimate contentment and felicity is his sincere struggle to utilize his latent talents and abilities to benefit from the guidance and Light of His liberal and beneficent Creator, because all the paths to prosperity and salvation end there. In the supplication of *sahar*, we recite:

اللهم اني أسئلك من نورك بأنورها و كل نورك نير اللهم اني أسئلك
بنورك كله

“O Lord, We ask you from You of Your most illuminating Light, and all Your Lights are illuminating; O

Allah I ask You by all your Light.”

After discussing the matters raised above, we should also think about the end of the verse:

وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

And God sets forth parables for men, and Allah is Cognizant of all things. (al-Nur, 24/35)

And Allah knows best.

1. Nahj al-Balagha, sermon 1

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