

Section 10: Qur'an Inimitable

Surah Isra' – Verse 85

وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا

85. “And they ask you about the spirit, say: ‘The spirit is of the command of my Lord, and you are not given of the knowledge but a little’.”

The Arabic term /rūḥ/ (spirit) has been mentioned 21 times in the Qur'an and used in certain cases. Anyway, man's spirit is a complicated matter, unknown and a Divine blow which has got celestial dimensions, and only Allah knows it.

Imam Baqir (as) has commented upon the Arabic term /qalil/ in the sense of 'few individuals'. That is, full knowledge has been only provided for only a select group of people and these are they who are exclusively aware of the soul.

Anyway, in this noble verse, pursuing previous verses, the Qur'an deals with some of the important questions of the pagans, or of the people of the Book, saying:

“And they ask you about the spirit, say: ‘The spirit is of the command of my Lord, and you are not given of the knowledge but a little’.”

Great commentators have been incessantly speaking about the commentaries of this verse, and we shall first deal with the meaning of 'soul', then its various forms of usage in the Qur'an and, afterwards, we shall deal with the comments of the verse and quotations in this regard.

1. The Arabic term /rūḥ/ (spirit), philologically signifies 'breath' and 'running'. Some declare that this word and the Arabic term /riḥ/, meaning 'wind', are both derived from the same root.

If we find /rūḥ/ the spirit, which is an abstract and independent 'gem' called this way, it is because, from the viewpoint of mobility and creative form as well as its invisibility, it is like breath and wind. So much is for the meaning the word.

2. There are various usages for it in the Qur'an: At times, it refers to 'the Holy Spirit' who has assisted the prophets in their missions like, verse 253 of Surah Al-Baqarah, which says:

“And We made Jesus, son of Mary, clear Signs, and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit...”

At other times, it refers to the Divine spiritual power which reinforces and invigorates the believers, like verse 22 of Surah Al-Mujadalah, No. 58, which says:

“...these are they into whose hearts He has impressed the faith, and whom He has confirmed with a spirit from Himself...”

Occasionally, it has been named as the 'exclusive angel of revelation' and has been characterized as 'Amin' (truthful) as in the verses 193–194 of Surah Ash-Shu'ara', No. 26, saying:

“The Faithful spirit has descended with it,”

“Upon your heart that you may be of the warners,”

At other times, it has been applied as one of the great angels of the 'exclusive Divine angels' or 'a creature superior to the angels', as in verse 4 of Surah Al-Qadr, No. 97, which says:

“The angels and the Spirit descend in it by the permission of their Lord for every affair.”

We also read in verse 38 of Surah An-Naba', No. 78:

“The Day (on which) the Spirit and the angels shall stand arrayed...”

On the day of the resurrection, the spirits and the angels stand up alongside one another forming one queue.

On other occasions, it has been regarded as the Qur'an or the Divine revelation like in verse 52 of Surah Ash-Shur a, that says:

“And thus did we reveal to you; an inspired Book by our command...”

And, finally, we find its venue used as human spirit, as we read in verses concerning the creation of man, saying:

“Then He fashioned him in due proportion and breathed into him of His spirit.”¹

And He also reiterates:

“So when I have completed him and I have breathed into him of My Spirit, fall you down, prostrating yourselves unto him.”²

3. The issue in question now is what is meant by ‘the spirit’ in the verse under discussion? Which spirit is it that a group of curious people have inquired about it and the Prophet (S) answered in response to them implying that the issue of spirit is among those which solely concern my Lord and you know but little about it.

Out of the totality of the existing references in the verse, as well as out of it, one can infer that those investigating ones were inquiring about the gist of the truth about human soul; this very splendid spirit which differentiates us from animals, and which is our utmost superior quality that causes our nobility, whence all our power and activities originate from, by the aid of which we turn the skies and the earth into our spheres of influence.

With its assistance, we tend to split the secrets of the sciences, delving into the core of the existence of all beings.

They sought to know what is this prodigy of the world of creation. And, as the soul is different in its structure with the matter which is subject to the principles governing the matter and its physical and chemical attributes, the Prophet (S) is commissioned to utter this concise and meaningful sentence:

“The spirit is of the command of my Lord.”

that is, its creation process is complicated and mysterious.

Then, to stop them being stunned, the verse continues saying:

“And they ask you about the spirit, say: ‘The spirit is of the command of my Lord, and you are not given of the knowledge but a little’.”

Thus, it is not at all surprising that you do not acquire the mysteries embodied in ‘spirit’, though they might be more intimate to you than all other things.

In the commentary of ‘Ayyashi, there are quotations from Imam Baqir (as) and Imam Sadiq (as) who commenting on /yas’alunaka ‘an-ir-rūh/ said:

“One of Allah’s creatures is ‘Spirit’ that has got senses of vision, power, and force as well. The Lord locates the spirit in the hearts of the prophets and of the believers”³.

In another quotation, one of the two great Imams has been quoted as saying:

“Spirit is of invisible world and emanates from Allah.”⁴

In numerous quotations from the Shiite and Sunni sources, we have it that the Quraysh pagans, getting

this question from the savants of the People of the Book, wanted to put the Prophet (S) to the test thereby.

They were told that in case Muhammad provided them with a great deal of information in this connection, this would be the reason for his dishonesty. Hence, the Prophet's (S) concise and meaningful statement was surprising and miraculous for them.

However, in quotations received through Ahl-ul-Bayt (as) regarding the commentary of the above verse, we note that 'spirit' has been considered as a created being introduced as superior to Gabriel and Michael, who has always remained with the Prophet (S) and the Imams, and who has kept them all, in their godly line, from every kind of deviation.

These quotations not only are not incompatible with the comments which we made about the verse, but they are also consistent with them in their entirety, since man's spirit has got a specific hierarchy.

That phase of the spirit which is found in prophets and in Imams, is surely an extraordinarily elevated stage, one of the consequences of which, is its infallibility and state of 'flawlessness' from deviations and sin as well as its full cognition state and its extraordinary state of knowledge. It is certain that such a phase of spirit excels all angelic stages, including those of Gabriel and Michael.

The Authenticity and Independence of the Spirit

The issue of the spirit and its structural forms along with its mysterious specifications has always been the focus of attention of the scientists since the recorded human history was begun, and every scientist has tried his share to delve and explore, as far as he can the mysterious environment of the spirit.

It is just for this very reason that the views expressed by men of knowledge are so widespread and various. Probably, our present knowledge, and even the knowledge of the future generations, for the recognition of the entire secrets of the mysterious nature of soul prove to be insufficient, though our spirit is in closer contact with us than anything else in this world.

However, we must not be caught by surprise, when we are incapable to understand the depth of this miracle of creation which is beyond matter, for the basic substance of the soul varies tremendously with whatever we have ever been associated with and got used to in this world.

This state of the spirit must not hinder us to explore its landscape by our sharp insight of our intellect, becoming aware of its underlying general principles and orders which are governing it.

The most important principle which must be recognized here is the issue of authenticity and independence of 'spirit' as against opposition raised by the materialistic schools which regard the spirit as something of material, considering it to be of the properties of the brain matter and the nerve cells, beyond which they believe in nothing to exist.

Our focus of discussion in here centers about this very issue, for all discussion of the 'survival of the spirit' and the issue of absolute abstraction or 'purgatory abstraction' relies heavily on it.

Before entering this discussion, however, we must point out to the fact that the interdependence of the spirit on the body as some have believed, is not a kind of interdependence like that of the introduction or, for instance, of the blowing of the wind into a bag pipe.

Contrarily, it is some kind of relationship and interdependence based on the administration and control of the spirit over the body and its domination and governance, that some have resembled it to the interdependence of 'meaning' to the utterance.

Certainly, this issue will best be clearly explained in the discussion of 'the independence of the soul'. Now, we shall turn to our principal discourse.

There is no doubt as to the fact that man is different from stone and wood which are lacking in spirit, for, we well feel different with respect to the inanimate objects, even with plants. We understand, imagine, decide, determine, love, hate, etc.

However, plants and stones lack in all these aspects in this form. Thus, there is an original difference between them, and us which is that of possessing human soul. Neither the materialists nor any other factions deny or reject the principle of the existence of the 'soul' or 'spirit', and, it is for this reason that all consider psychology and psychoanalysis as a positive science.

Although both of these two sciences are in their infancy, they are those branches of knowledge which are pursued by professors and researchers at great world universities. As we shall see 'the soul' and the 'spirit' are not, in fact, separate from each other; but they are different phases of the same reality.

As far as the issue involved is that of the relationship of the spirit with the body and their mutual interdependence, we call it the 'soul', and, while, spiritual phenomena are being discussed away from the body, we tend to call it the 'spirit'.

Briefly speaking, no one rejects the fact that there exists an entity which is called the 'spirit' and the 'soul' within us.

It now remains to be seen that the all-encompassing conflicts between the materialists, on the one hand, and the metaphysicians and spiritualists, on the other hand, are being waged in which domain?

The answer is that the theologians and the philosophers who are metaphysician believe that in addition to the substances which form the body of man, there is another entity or gem hidden in him which is not made of the matter, though man's body is under its direct impact.

In other words, the spirit is a metaphysical entity, the structural form and activity of which is other than the structure and activity of the material world. It is true that it is constantly in contact with the material

world, but it is not ‘matter’ or properly of matter.

On the opposite side, the materialist philosophers are aligned who say: We do not know of any independent being different from matter under the name of the spirit or under any other name; whatever exists is this material body or its physical or chemical effects.

We possess a system called the brain or nerve system which does an important part of our essential activities for us and which perform their functions like other bodily systems, acting under material laws.

Certainly, scientists reject this line of reasoning which is propounded by the material philosophers, declaring it is null and void. For further information, refer to Tafsir–Nemānah, vol. 12, under the same verse.

To conclude this statement, the word /rūh/ (spirit) has been repeated 21 times in the Qur’an, and the reality of the ‘spirit’ is beyond the understanding of man’s knowledge which lies as one of the Divine secrets. Man’s knowledge, with respect to it, is limited and very minimal.

Surah Isra’ – Verses 86 – 87

وَلَئِن شِئْنَا لَنَذْهَبَنَّ بِالَّذِي أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ ثُمَّ لَا تَجِدُ لَكَ بِهِ عَلَيْنَا وَكِيلًا

إِلَّا رَحْمَةً مِن رَّبِّكَ إِنَّ فَضْلَهُ كَانَ عَلَيْكَ كَبِيرًا

86. “And if We please, We would certainly take away whatever We have revealed unto you; then you would find no one thereover to defend you against Us,”

87. “Save the mercy from your Lord, verily His favour to you is great.”

Whatever you possess emanates from His Grace. The issue in question concerned the Holy Qur’an itself in several of the previous verses. He once again takes up the discussion on this subject.

At first, He says:

“And if We please, We would certainly take away whatever We have revealed unto you; then you would find no one thereover to defend you against Us,”

So, it is We Who has bestowed these sciences upon you so as to enable you to be the leader of the people and it is We Who will take back whatever We deem expedient, and there will be no interference allowed by anyone in this respect.

Therefore, this noble verse takes up a threatening attitude towards the holy Prophet (S) declaring that the Lord takes back those merits if He wishes in much the same way that he has bestowed.

The subsequent verse has got a soft and encouraging tone. In other words, the Qur'an, the revelations, prophetic mission, being the seal of Prophets, and intercession all are among Allah's favors towards the holy Prophet (S), and they all originate from the position of Allah's Lordship, and He will not take back all He has bestowed on him, though He is capable with firm power, and He can perfectly do that.

The holy verse says:

“Save the mercy from your Lord...”

However, as Allah is great with utmost superiority, His favor is also just as great, and His immense kindness is peculiar to the Prophet (S).

Thus the verse continues to say:

“...verily His favour to you is great.”

Allah's great kindness is immense with regard to you, for He has selected you as His prophet, and granted the Qur'an to you so as to open up new gateways of knowledge facing you, and to make you aware of the secrets of human guidance, and, finally, to protect you from all errors, enabling you to serve as an example for all the people till the end of the world.

Surah Isra' – Verse 88

قُلْ لِّئِنِ اجْتَمَعَتِ الْإِنْسُ وَالْجِنُّ عَلَيَّ أَنْ يَأْتُوا بِمِثْلِ هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ لَا يَأْتُونَ بِمِثْلِهِ وَلَوْ
كَانَ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ ظَهِيراً

88. “Say: ‘If (the whole) mankind and the Jinn were to gather together to bring the like of this Qur'an, they could not bring the like of it though some of them be helpers of others.’”

The Arabic term /zahir/ is derived from /zahr/ meaning ‘backing up’ and ‘advocate’.

The verse is an answer to the pagans who used to say: We, too, can bring the like of the Qur'an if we want to.

This call of the Qur'an for challenging, and bringing an example like that, has remained unanswered for centuries and, up till now, the Arabic-speaking enemies from among the people of the Book as well as the atheistic schools, have been unable to bring the like of the Qur'an despite their hostility towards

Islam and despite the support which they have enjoyed from the various sources of power.

Anyway, here the Almighty, addressing the Prophet (S), announces:

“Say: ‘If (the whole) mankind and the Jinn were to gather together to bring the like of this Qur’an, they could not bring the like of it though some of them be helpers of others.’”

This verse explicitly challenges all the beings of the world, including the small and the great, Arabs and non-Arabs, human beings as well as even intelligent non-human beings, scientists, philosophers, literary figures, historians, the genius and the non-genius, briefly speaking, all without exceptions throughout the centuries to face the challenge of producing the like of the holy Qur’an, proclaiming:

If you think that the Qur’an is not the word of the Lord and it is man’s own fabrication, you are also a man and you can fabricate one like that. And, whenever you felt unable, after struggling hard, while combining your efforts, this provides you with the best reason for the miraculous nature of the Qur’an.

This call for challenging with the Qur’an, which is in the vocabulary of the scholars, expert in theology, known as /tahaddi/, (challenge) is one of the pillars of every miracle and wherever such a meaning is in force concerning a subject, we find transparency as to the miraculous nature of that issue in question.

Incidentally, the unique specifications of the Holy Qur’an consist of being both miraculous while, at the same time, it is eloquent and varying; it foretells the future while containing the best of stories; it provides the best method of calling while it is expressive of all problems, whether social and individual needs, worldly and after-life requirements in all fields and at all times.

Surah Isra’ – Verse 89

وَلَقَدْ صَرَّفْنَا لِلنَّاسِ فِي هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ مِنْ كُلِّ مَثَلٍ فَأَبَى أَكْثَرُ النَّاسِ إِلَّا كُفُورًا

89. “And We have explainer for the people, in this Qur’an, every (kind of) similitude, but incline not most of the people save denying.”

By means of the verses of the Qur’an, Allah has completed the argument to people. This verse, in fact, is the statement of one of the aspects of miracle and the inimitability of the Holy Qur’an, i.e. its comprehensiveness.

It implies that, in this noble Qur’an, Allah has displayed unto the people examples of everything so that all sorts of knowledge are gathered in it; yet most of the people refused to do anything but denying.

The verse says:

“And We have explainer for the people, in this Qur’an, every (kind of) similitude, but incline not most of the people save denying.”

Verily, this variety of the contents of the Qur’an, and emerging from an illiterate person in particular, is amazing. This heavenly Book contains both the firm rational reasoning together with its special elaborateness in the field of creeds, and the statement of the ever-sure ordinances based on the necessities of people in any grounds.

The Qur’anic discussions upon historical subjects are unique in their kind. They are exciting, awakening, interesting, shaking, and free from any kinds of superstition. Its ethical matters affect on the prepared hearts in the same manner that the rain of the spring does upon the dead lands.

The scientific points which are propounded in the Qur’an have made manifest some facts which, at least in that time, were not known to any scientist.

Precisely speaking, whatever fields the Qur’an arrives, it offers the best. That is why if the Jinn and humankind come to help each other in order to bring the like of it, they will not be able to do so.

Surah Isra’ – Verses 90 – 91

وَقَالُوا لَنْ نُؤْمِنَ لَكَ حَتَّى تَفْجُرَ لَنَا مِنَ الْأَرْضِ يَنْبُوعاً

أَوْ تَكُونَ لَكَ جَنَّةٌ مِنْ نَخِيلٍ وَعِنَبٍ فَتُفَجِّرَ الْأَنْهَارَ خِلَالَهَا تَفْجِيراً

90. “And they said: “We shall never believe in you till you make a spring to gush forth from the earth for us,”

91. “Or till you should have a garden of date-palms and grapes in the midst of which you cause streams to flow forth,”

The Arabic term /yanb/ refers to a fountain which will never dry up and which will always gush.

The pagans, who rejected the miraculous nature of the Qur’an, made their embracing the belief conditional upon attainment of some material gains, asking the holy Prophet (S) for some undue expectations.

They neglected the fact that the prophets would perform miracles so as to justify their prophetic mission. This is done not for meeting the whimsical demands of the obstinate people or for the sake of their entertainment or escaping from effort and endeavour.

In fact, undue expectation, callousness, obstinacy, seeking pretexts, unawareness of the aims, and rudeness, all intermingled with one another so as to put illogical requests to the Prophet (S), like a fountain, gardens, rivers, collapse and fall of the skies, summoning of the Lord and of the angels, golden houses, flight into skies, and a private letter from the Lord.

Anyway, the pagans of Mecca stated:

We do not confirm your prophetic mission unless you split the ground of Mecca which is scarce in water resources and make a fountain emerge out of it, which gashes.

The verse says:

“And they said: “We shall never believe in you till you make a spring to gush forth from the earth for us,”

Or they demanded from him a garden which had got plenty of date-palms and grape trees, covered by them, amidst which streams flow so as to water trees beneath them, little knowing that the goal of the prophets had been people’s guidance and leading them to monotheism, though some groups thought of gardens, gold and silver while such requests and expectations were not logical.

The verse says:

“Or till you should have a garden of date-palms and grapes in the midst of which you cause streams to flow forth,”

Surah Isra’ – Verses 92 – 93

أَوْ تُسْقِطَ السَّمَاءَ كَمَا زَعَمْتَ عَلَيْنَا كِسْفًا أَوْ تَأْتِيَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةِ قَبِيلًا

أَوْ يَكُونَ لَكَ بَيْتٌ مِّن زُخْرٍ أَوْ تَرْقَى فِي السَّمَاءِ وَلَنْ نُؤْمِنَ لِرُقِيِّكَ حَتَّىٰ تَنْزِلَ
عَلَيْنَا كِتَابًا نَّقْرُوهُ قُلْ سُبْحَانَ رَبِّي هَلْ كُنْتُ إِلَّا بَشَرًا رَسُولًا

92. “Or you cause the heaven, as you think, to fall in pieces upon us, or bring Allah and the angels face to face with us,”

93. “Or there be for you a house of gold, or you should be flying in to the sky, and never will we believe in your ascending unless you bring down to us a book which we may read. Say: ‘Glory be to my Lord! Am I aught but a mortal messenger?’”

Miracles are among the exclusive characters of the Divinity of the Lord and have their origin in the Divine will and Wisdom. From among the conditions of miracles is that they must not be aimless, useless and utterly improbable.

The demands of the pagan from the Prophet (S) are worthless. Making the skies collapse will exterminate all and every thing, leaving no one alive to become a believer. Summoning of the Lord and the angels is also an utter impossibility, for they are not 'bodies' which can be summoned for us so as we witness them with our eyes.

Therefore, in this verse, the obstinate pagans reiterated that you thought you were a prophet and you possessed miracles, therefore, turn the sky into pieces, shredding everything and making them fall over us. Or you bring forth⁵ the Lord and the angels before⁶ us so as we can see them with our own eyes and witness that you are authentic and legitimate, your call being valid.

The verse says:

“Or you cause the heaven, as you think, to fall in pieces upon us, or bring Allah and the angels face to face with us,”

In the subsequent verse, the Qur'an says:

“Or there be for you a house of gold...”

Or you ascend to the sky. Even if we witness with our own eyes, doing that, we are not to believe, unless you fetch us each a book from Allah testifying to your prophetic mission, which we shall read.

The verse continues saying:

“...or you should be flying in to the sky, and never will we believe in your ascending unless you bring down to us a book which we may read...”⁷

We read at the end of these verses that Allah commands His prophet, culminating these contradictory and paradoxical proposals, to say to them that He is clean and pure of all these imaginary conjectures; that is, He is distant from performing miracles according to your wishes.

Thus, the holy Prophet (S), addressing them, said: I am also like other prophets. I am a human being. Those prophets used to perform miracles for their nations which were actualized by Allah.

This is not a matter of concern to me and up to me to do what I wish. It is up to Him alone, Who is aware of what is expedient. Thus, there is no reason as to why you demand such things from me.

The verse continues saying:

“...Say: ‘Glory be to my Lord! Am I aught but a mortal messenger?’”

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1. Surah As-Sajdah, No. 32, verse 9
 2. Surah Al-Hijr, No, 15, verse 29
 3. Tafsir Nūr-uth-Thaqalayn, vol. 3, p. 216
 4. Ibid, p. 215
 5. The Arabic phrase /kama za‘amtum/ is an allusion made to the threats and the pledges of chastisement which the Prophet (S) states in Surah Saba’, verse 9.
 6. The Qur’anic term /qabil/ refers to what is placed before man and what he is confronted with.
 7. The Arabic term /zukhruf/ denotes originally some kind of ornament, like gold which is one of the precious metals, and is used as ornament. This term is also applied for houses with paintings and decorations.

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