

Understanding the Qur'an, Part 1

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Understanding the Quran is important for every Muslim as the Quran influences a Muslims religious, social and economical life.

The present text starts with the ways the Quran can be understood and it comprises of two main parts: Understanding the Quran analytically and Reason in the view of the Quran. Very thorough and interesting work.

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Introduction

In the Name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful

For the scholar as a scholar, the person interested in religions as a person interested in religion, and the believing Muslim as a believer, an understanding of the Quran is an urgent necessity.

For the sociologist it is essential to understand the Quran because of the impression that this book has made on the fate of Islamic society, and on the fate of humanity as a whole. A survey of history reveals that no other book has had the effect on human life and society that the Quran has had. Thus it is that the Quran automatically enters the field of discussion of sociology, becoming one of the subjects that sociology must survey. What this all adds up to is that to survey and investigate humanity's development over the last fourteen hundred years in general, and Islamic society in particular, with no knowledge of the Quran is not at all feasible.

Neither, for the same reasons, is it possible for the person wishing to investigate the subject of religion to overlook this book, the most recent and well-known of all religious books.

The need of understanding the Quran by the believing Muslim, however, is due to the reason that the Quran is the principal basis of the religion, faith, and thought of the believing Muslim, and that which gives meaning, enthusiasm, sanctity and spirit to his life.

The Quran is not like those other religious books which have raised a series of near-symbolic ideas about God and the creation and which, at the most, have appended a chain of simple ethical edicts and no more, and which leave the believer forced to take instructions and ideas from other sources. The Quran has explained all the principles of belief, thought, and ideas that are essential for the "believing human being", as well as those of behaviour, ethics and the order of the family and society, and has only entrusted expositions, interpretations, explanations, and a little ijtehad, the conformance of these principles to the actions of a Muslim's daily life, to the "sunnah" (the teachings of the Prophet and his immaculate successors), and (in these times) to ijtehad. Thus it is that to benefit from any other source depends upon a previous understanding of the Quran, for the Quran is the standard and criterion of every other source, not only the "traditions" and sunnah.

The most reliable and holiest sources of knowledge of we Muslims, after the Quran, are, in the "traditions", the "four books" (*Kutub arb'a*) i.e. *Kafi*, *Man la yah-daratul-faqih*, *Tahdhib*, and *Istibsar*, and, in lectures, *Nahj ul-balagha*, and in supplicatory prayers, *Sahifah Sajadiyah*. However, all of these are secondary to the Quran, meaning that they are only reliable as far as they accord to the Quran and present the same kind of teachings. The Holy Prophet and Imams have told us to present their "traditions" to the Quran, and if they do not accord to the Quran, we must know that they are forgeries that have only been attributed to the Prophet and Imams, for they themselves utter nothing that

disagrees with the Quran.

The Types of Understanding of the Quran

Now that the urgency of understanding the Quran has been specified, we must look at how it is to be understood. As a general rule, when investigating or studying any book, there are three things that must be known:

1. Its Authenticity

Here we need to know to what extent the book is definitely the work of the author it is attributed to. As an example, imagine that we want to understand the *Divan* of Hafiz or of Khayam.¹ The first thing we must do is look to see whether the whole of the book that is known as the *Divan* of Hafiz or of Khayam was written by Hafiz or Khayam or whether only some of it. And the same applies to other books. And this is where we bring forth the support of other copies; the oldest most authentic copies we can find. We need to do this with whatever book we investigate. Between the *Divan* of Hafiz that the late Qazvini published and the usual *Divan* of Hafiz which was printed in Iran or Bombay and possessed by many families, there exists a great difference. The *Divans* that were printed about thirty or forty years ago contain about twice as much as what is now considered to be reliably Hafiz. And this is due in part to the fact that sometimes an ordinary poet would sometimes compose a few lines at the extraordinary level of Hafiz which would later come to be counted amongst the works of Hafiz.

Or take Khayam, for example. When we look at the verses attributed to Khayam we see that there are about two hundred that are all more or less on the same level. But when we look with a practiced eye, we see that those of them which are definitely Khayam's are perhaps less than twenty; the rest are either doubtfully his work or definitely the works of others.

The first stage of coming to know and understand any book, therefore, is that we discover to what extent the book has a reliable relation to its author. We must see whether it is all correctly attributed to the author it is said to be from, or whether the attribution of a part of it to the author is correct and the attribution of the rest of it is incorrect. How much of it can we confirm and what percentage must we reject? By what means?

These are questions that must be posed in relation to all the books of the ancient world except the holy Quran, the only exception. Matters like, "such and such chapter is doubtful", or "such and such verse of this or that chapter is in this copy but not in that copy" and so on, just do not exist in respect of the Quran. No other ancient book can be found that has existed for centuries without any equal to match it. And, in the same way, the Quran is also a step ahead of the experts in ancient manuscripts.

There is no room for the slightest doubt in that the presenter to mankind of all the chapters and verses, the *surahs* and *ayat*, of the Holy Quran was the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S), who presented them as

being a miracle and divinely authored. Nobody can claim or presume that any copy different from the Quran universally available today exists or has ever existed. No western orientalist, even, has ever stated the need of beginning the task of understanding the Quran by discovering the oldest copies and comparing them to the newest. If this need exists in relation to the Torah, the Bible, the Vedas, or, for example, the works of ancient poet like Ferdowsi, Hafez, and Khayam, this need does not exist in relation to the Quran.

Besides being a divinely-revealed book that is looked upon by its followers as the most fundamental proof of the call of the Prophet Muhammad (S) and his greatest miracle, the Holy Quran is not like the Torah, which was revealed as a whole and which thus gives rise to the problem of discerning the original from all the different copies. The verses of the Quran were revealed to the Prophet and thereafter to mankind gradually, over a period of twenty-three years. And from the very first day of its revelation, the Muslims, like people with a burning thirst on coming to a clear, cool spring, learned those verses, remembered them and recorded them.

Especially because the Muslim society of the first days was a very simple one in which no other book existed for the Muslims to remember and record; the empty minds, the strong, trained memory power and general illiteracy of that early society became the cause of the Muslims only taking their information from what they saw and heard. For this reason, the Quran, which suited their feelings and affections, took form in the hearts of the early Muslims just as naturally as water sinks into fertile soil. Furthermore, because the Muslims recognised it as being the word of God rather than of man, they considered it as being holy and prohibited themselves from changing or re-arranging even a word or letter. Their continuous struggle was that, by reciting the Quranic *ayat* (verses) they would become closer to God.

Over and above all this, it is essential to mention that from the very first days of his mission, the Holy Prophet selected special scribes for the Quran, who are known as *Kottab al-wah-ye*, or writers of revelation. This is a distinction that the Quran has over all the other ancient books. The recording of the Word of God from the very commencement of its revelation is one of the clear reasons for its remaining safe and immune from alteration.

Another of the causes for the Quran's popular reception amongst the people was its extraordinary and powerful literary standard and art that can be called "eloquence". This extreme literary allure and magnetism of the Quran magnetised the attention of the people to its message and caused them to quickly learn it, while unlike the cases of normal works of literature which generally have interested parties making alterations in order to increase, in their view, the standard of the book's perfection, no one; allowed himself to alter the slightest detail of the Quran. Had anyone intended to do so, this verse:

“And if he (the Prophet) had attributed to Us some of the sayings, We would have seized him by the right hand and plucked out the great artery of his heart.” (69:44-46.)

together with the other verses which clarify the gravity of attributing false statements to God would have

formed instantly in such a person's mind and quickly caused him to change his intention.

Thus it happened that, before this heavenly book could be subject to any alteration, its verses became so well known (*motawair*) that to deny or add or remove even a single letter was no longer possible. Accordingly, no specialist on the Quran has ever felt the necessity of considering this point; there is simply no need.

There is one point, however, that must not be overlooked. And this is that due to the rapid expansion of the realm of Islam and the Quran's wondrous reception amongst different peoples of the world, together with the fact that the general Muslim population lived far from Medina – the home of the Prophet's companions and the *hafizin* of the Quran – the danger existed that gradually, in the furthest regions at least, additions, deletions and changes would eventually take place, either through accident or intention.

However, the alertness and firm resolve of the Muslims prevented this. In the first century A.H., the Muslims became aware of this danger and in order to thwart it made good use of the presence of the companions and *hafizin*, so that certified copies of the Quran were distributed from Medina and such mistakes and alterations, especially of the Jews who were well-practiced at this kind of thing, were prevented forever.

2. Its Contents

Having reached this stage, our object is to survey the book analytically. That is, to discern the subjects the book consists of, the goals it pursues, how it looks at life, at the human being, and at society, how it presents the subjects it contains, and how it meets arising difficulties. Does it have a philosophical, scholastic way of looking at things? Does it view things with the eyes-of a gnostic, or does it have a method peculiar to itself? Yet another question that arises here is whether the book contains a message and guidance for mankind. If it does, what is the nature of its message?

The first category of these questions is related to the book's view towards the world, the human being, life and death and so on. This can be called its world or general view (*jihan-bini*). The second category of questions relates particularly to the kind of system it presents for the future of humanity. On what pattern does it intend to build the human being and human society? These questions relate to the book's message.

In any case, this kind of understanding relates to the contents of the book, and all books can be discussed in this way. Possibly a book will be empty of both "view" and "message". Or it can have "view" but not "message", or it can have both.

* * *

When examining the book analytically, we must observe the subjects the Quran consists of and in what terms these matters are presented. What are the Quran's evidences and proofs in different areas? What

is its relationship with reason and common-sense (*'aql*)? Does the Quran, because it is the guardian of belief and its message a message of belief, regard the power of reason and common-sense (*'aql*) as its rival, striving to prevent its influence, to "bind the hands and feet" of its rival? Or, on the contrary, does it regard reason and common-sense as a supporter and defender, seeking the assistance of its strength? These questions, and hundreds like them which are raised when obtaining an analytical understanding, introduce us to the Quran's essence.

3. Its Sources

Once the authenticity of the relation between the book and its author has been established and a proper review has been made of its contents, it remains to be seen whether the contents of the book are the original thoughts of the author or whether they are the thoughts of others that have been borrowed.

In the *Divan* of Hafiz, for example, after passing the stage of checking its authenticity and analyzing its contents, we must look to see whether the thoughts and ideas which Hafiz has expressed in the form of words, lines and verses, and which he has explained in his own particular way are originally those of Hafiz himself or whether the verse and prose, the beauty and artistic skill, is only the work of Hafiz, while the original thoughts and ideas are those of others. Or, in other words, once the artistic originality is determined, the originality of the ideas must also be determined.

This kind of understanding about Hafiz and any other author is an understanding of the source of the author's thought. And such an understanding is based on the analytical understanding. Which means that firstly the contents of the author's thought must be minutely understood, and only then can one begin to understand its originality. Otherwise, the result will be like the works of some writers on the history of science who have no skill in science themselves but still write on its history. Or, for example, the names of some of the writers of philosophy books can be mentioned who want to write about Ibne Sina and Aristotle and their similar phrases and differences but who, unfortunately, understand neither Ibne Sina nor Aristotle. Such writers by making only a few comparisons and finding a few textual similarities, immediately give judgement, when, for a proper comparison, the profound thoughts of the two must be traced. And in order to discover the thoughts of such thinkers as Ibne Sina and Aristotle, a lifetime of study is needed; otherwise, all that will be stated will be no more than conjecture and blind imitation.

In reviewing the Quran in order to understand it, once we have subjected it to an analytical study, we then commence to compare it and understand it historically. That is, we must compare the Quran to all the other books of its time, especially religious books. In this comparison it is necessary that we take into account all the relevant conditions, such as the scale of relations between the Arabian Peninsula and other places, the number of literate persons living at that time in Meccah, and so on. Then it can be assessed whether that which in the Quran exists is also to be found in other books.

If it is to be found, what is the relation between the Quran and these books? Are the subjects which are

similar to those of other books borrowed from those books, or are they independent, perhaps even having the role of correcting their mistakes and clarifying their alterations?

The Quran's Three Distinctions

A study of the Quran introduces us to the Quran's three distinctions. The first distinction it has is the distinction of its attributes. That is, with no doubt and no need to trace ancient copies, it is clear that the book which today is called the Holy Quran is that very same book which its bringer, Muhammad ibne 'Abdullah (S), presented to the world all that time ago.

Its second distinction is the originality of its contents, for the teachings of the Quran are not picked up or borrowed, but are original. Research in this area is the duty of analytical understanding. The third distinction is the Quran's Divine. Origin. The Quran flowed to the Holy Prophet from the spiritual horizon far beyond his human mind, and the Holy Prophet was merely the deliverer of this inspirational message. This is realised by investigating the Quran's origins.

However, knowing the Quran's origins, or, in other words, ascertaining the origins of the Quranic teachings, depends upon the second type of understanding. And it is for this reason that we will begin our discussion from there. We will review the nature of the Quran's contents and the issues which the Quran has raised, investigating the issues to which the Quran has displayed more sensitivity, and noting how it presents its subjects. If in this analytic understanding of the Quran we can give the subject its due and discharge our obligation to it and discover a sufficient knowledge of the Quran, then, as we have said, we will understand the distinction which is the main distinction of the Quran, its "Divine Originality". In other words, the fact that the Quran is a miracle.

Conditions for Knowing the Quran

Understanding the Quran requires several preliminary conditions which we will briefly mention . One is a knowledge of Arabic, for, in the same way as to understand Hafiz or Sa'adi with no knowledge of Persian is impossible, so there is no possibility of knowing the Quran, which is in Arabic, with no knowledge of Arabic.

Another condition is a knowledge of the history of Islam, as the Quran is not like the *Torah* or the *Injil* (the original gospel of Jesus), which were presented through a Prophet in a single revelation, but was gradually revealed over a period of twenty-three years during the life of the Holy Prophet – from his appointment to his demise – in the midst of the breath-taking events of Islamic history. It is for this reason that the ayat (verses) of the Quran have what is called *sh-an an-nuzul* (circumstances of revelation). This "circumstance of revelation" is not something that limits the meaning of the verse to itself. On the contrary, knowing the circumstances of revelation is, to a great extent, effective in explaining its contents.

The third condition is a knowledge of the Holy Prophet's traditions (*hadith*), for the Holy Prophet is the Quran's primary explainer (*mofasser*). In the Quran we are told:

"And We sent the remembrance (i.e. the Quran) down to you (O Prophet) for you to explain to mankind what has been sent down to them."(16:44)

Or, in another verse:

"He it is who, from amongst the illiterate, raised a Prophet to recite to them His ayat and purify them and teach them the Book and Wisdom."(62:2)

According to the view of the Quran, the Holy Prophet is himself the *mofasser*, or explainer, of the Quran, and, therefore, that which reaches us from the Prophet helps us to understand it. In addition, for those of us who are fortunate enough to be Shi'ite and believe in the principle of Imamate and that whatever the Prophet received from God was transferred to his holy heirs, reliable traditions from the twelve Imams have the same reliability as reliable traditions that have reached us from the Holy Prophet. Therefore, dependable traditions from the Imams are also a great help in our understanding the Quran.

Another important point which we must pay attention to is that, at the first stage, we must understand the Quran with the help of the Quran itself. The meaning of this is that the total content of the Quran's verses form an interlocking structure. If one verse is separated from the Quran and it is wanted to understand just that one, single verse, a good method has not been selected. Of course, it is possible that our understanding of that verse will be correct, but this method is not in accord to precaution.

Some of the verses of the Quran are the explainers and illuminators of other verses. And, as some great commentators (*mofasserin*) have stated, the Holy Imams have endorsed this approach. The Quran has its own special way of explaining its issues. In many cases, if a single verse is taken from the Quran without it being considered alongside other, similar verses, an understanding will be reached that will be totally opposed to the understanding of the same verse that is reached when considered with the other verses of similar content.

As an example of the Quran's special method, we can mention the *mohkam* (firm) and *motashabah* verses, which are similitudes. About the meaning of the distinctions, there is a generally held view that the *mohkam* verses are those the subject matter of which have been clearly and easily presented, while, on the other hand, the subject matter of the *motashabah* is presented in the form of a riddle or a code. According to this definition, people only have the right to reflect on the *mohkam* verses because they are easy and clear, while the *motashabah* verses are fundamentally beyond understanding and it is not possible to reflect upon them. It is here that these questions arise: what, then, is the point of these *motashabah* verses at all? Why does the Quran contain verses that are totally beyond comprehension?

The short answer is that the meaning of *mohkam* is neither clear and easy, and nor is the meaning of *motashabah* code-like and mysterious. A code is some kind of word or phrase with an obscure meaning

that is not directly understood from the words which convey it. Are there such verses in the Quran? Such a proposition contradicts the statement of the Quran itself, for it tells us that the Quran is a book which is clear and understandable for all, and that all its verses are light and guidance. This question only arises because some of the issues that are raised in the Quran, especially dealing with the *ghayb*, the beyond, are fundamentally not explainable in words.

However, because the Quran is delivered to human beings in a human language, it is inevitable that these subtle spiritual issues be explained in the same language that mankind uses for material matters. Therefore, in order to prevent misunderstandings, the subject matters of some verses have been presented in such a way that they must definitely be explained with the help of different verses; there is no alternative. For example, it is intended in the Quran to mention the reality of "seeing God with the heart" – meaning that the human being can witness God with his heart, and this is explained in the following terms:

"Some faces that day will be bright, looking towards their Lord ... " (75:22-23)

The term "looking" (*nazerah*) has been used in the Quran and there was no other word, nor could there be in any human language, but in order to prevent any mistakes there exists an explanation:

"Vision perceives Him not, but He perceives (all) vision." (6: 103)

Here, naturally, the reader becomes aware that in spite of the similarity in wordings, these two affairs are not the same and are entirely separate from each other. The Quran, in order to prevent the high sublime meaning being mistaken for the material meaning, has told us to refer the *motashabah* verses to the *mohkam*:

"He (it is) who has revealed to you the book; of it are firm (mohkam) verses – these are the 'mother of the book.' (3: 7)

Firm (*mohkam*) ,means that they cannot be separated from their meaning and applied to some other meaning. These verses are the *Umm-ul-kitab*, the "Mother of the Book". In the same way that a baby returns and refers to its mother while the mother is its authority, and small towns refer to district or state capitals – which are counted as being in authority over them and which are called "mother of villages" (*Umm-al-Qura*) in Arabic – so the 'firm' verses are to be referred to the *motashabah* verses. That is, these *motashabah* verses are to be reflected upon and understood, but reflection on these must be with the help of the 'firm' verses. Without the help of the "mother-verses", whatever is grasped from the *motashabah* verses will not be reliable.

Can the Quran be Known?

When reviewing the Quran and its contents analytically, the first question that is raised is whether, fundamentally, it is feasible to try and review and understand the Quran at all. That is, is it legitimate to

think and reflect about the issues the Quran raises, or has the book been presented not at all in order to be understood, but solely for reciting and for *thawab* (divine rewards in the hereafter)?

Possibly someone will think that there is no case for such a question, and that the fact that the Quran is a book to be understood cannot be subject to the slightest doubt. However, bearing in mind the fact that, throughout the Islamic world, certain undesirable currents concerning this issue have, for various reasons, appeared and been very effective in the deviation of the Muslims, and, because such degrading and dangerous ideas still, unfortunately, exist amongst us, it is necessary for an explanation to be offered here.

Some three or four centuries ago a group of individuals appeared amongst the Shi'ite scholars (*ulema*) with the view that the Quran is not a binding authority (*hujjat*). Of the four sources of jurisprudence which the *ulema* of Islam hold as the criteria for knowing the Islamic rules – i.e. the Quran, the Sunnah, reason or common-sense (*'aql*) and consensus (*ijma*) – these people accepted only one. They said consensus is a custom of Sunni Muslims which must not be imitated. They said to rely on reason (*'aql*) with all the mistakes reason makes, is not permissible. And, about the Quran, they respectfully claimed that the Quran is greater than that which we humble mortals can study and reflect upon. Their view was that only the Prophet and the Holy Imams have the right to reflect on the Quranic verses, while others only have the right to recite them. These people became known as the *akhbariyin*.

These *akhbariyin* considered only referral to the tradition of the Prophet and Imams to be permissible. Surprisingly, in some of the commentaries of the Quran written by this group, in the footnote to each verse, if there was a tradition, they mentioned it, and if there was no tradition, they refrained even from writing the verse, just as if it was never a part of the Quran.

This action of theirs was a category of injustice and oppression (*zulm*) towards the Quran. And it is self-evident that any society which rejects its heavenly book in this fashion, and that, too, the Holy Quran, and consigns it to the powers of forgetfulness, will never move in its path.

Apart from these *akhbariyin*, there were also other groups who considered the Quran to be beyond general reach. Amongst these we can mention the *'asha'erah* who believed that the meaning of understanding the Quran is not reflecting on its verses but understanding their literal meanings. Which means that whatever one can understand from the apparent aspect of the verses is to be accepted while their internal aspects are not to be considered at all.

Naturally, this system of approach to the Quran very quickly misleads and deviates, for this group had no option but to explain the meanings of the Quran, and, since they had put their reason to sleep, an extremely vulgar understanding of the Quran was the result. This group, due to their way of thinking, quickly departed from the path of perception and became subject to the most ridiculous beliefs. Beliefs appeared like the belief in *tajassum* – the belief that God, the Sublime, takes material forms – and hundreds of other deviated beliefs like being able to see God, and so on.

As opposed to the groups who had essentially rejected the Quran, another group appeared who used the Quran for their own ends. This group, in whatever area their interest lay, referred to interpretations of the Quran and attributed things to the Quran that the spirit of the Holy Quran was totally opposed to. The reply of this group to all kinds of protest was that they themselves were the only people who knew the profound aspects of the Quran, and that whatever they said arose from their own, special knowledge of the Quran's profound meanings.

This current in Islamic history split into two groups: the *Isma'iliyah*, who are also called the *batiniyah*, and the *motasawwifah*. The *Isma'iliyah* are mostly in India, Pakistan, and the areas populated by the people of the sub-continent. They also once founded a government which was the Fatamid government of Egypt (296–567 A.H.).

The *Isma'iliyah* are termed as six-Imam Shi'ites, but, definitely, the consensus and agreed opinion of the twelve-Imam Shi'ite ulema is that of all non-Shi'ites, these six-Imam people are the furthest from the truth of *tashayyo*'. That is, even Sunni Muslims who do not accept even one of the Shi'ite Imams as being what Shi'ites believe them to be are nearer to *tashayyo* than those who are termed six-Imam Shi'ites.³ These *Isma'iliyah*, by means of their playing with the subject of the Quran's profound aspect, were guilty of a great deal of treachery in Islamic history and played a major role in the deviation of Islamic affairs.

The *motasawwifah*, too, had great expertise in tampering with the Quranic verses and interpreting them, according to their own personal beliefs. Here I will cite a sample of their commentaries so that the method of their tampering will become clear.

In the Quran, where we are told about Abraham (a.s.) and his son Isma'il (a.s.), it is stated that several times Abraham received the instructions in a dream to sacrifice his son for God. At first Abraham is very surprised, but after the dream is repeated several times he finds certainty and submits to the order of his Lord. He then puts the matter before his son, who sincerely accepts it and submits to the Divine judgement. The meaning of this is exactly what it appears to be: the submission to and satisfaction with God's judgement.

And it was for this reason that when, with their interior purity and sincere intention, they were ready to carry out the command of God the Sublime and Holy, God stopped the performance of His command. In the commentary of this event, the *motasawwifah* have stated that by *Abraham* is meant reason (*aql*), and by *Isma'il* is means the self (*nafs*), and here reason had the intention of slaying the self!

It is clear that such a perception is merely toying with the Quran to present a deviated understanding. It is about just such deviated perceptions which are based on personal and party desires that the Prophet told us: "Whoever explains the Quran according to his (own) view prepares his place in the fire (of Hell)."

Such playing with the Quranic verses counts as a betrayal of the Quran, an extremely grave betrayal at that.

In contrast to the hollow, lifeless ideas of the *akhbariyin* and their equivalents, and, likewise, the deviations and far-fetched perceptions of the *bataniyah* and others, the Quran proposes a middle course, which is the course of unmotivated, honest reflection and deliberation. The Quran not only calls believers to thought and reflection about its verses but also calls its opponents, inviting them to refrain from taking sides and, instead, simply reflect on its verses. Addressing itself to its opponents, it states:

"Why do they not reflect on the Quran, (it is) as if there are locks on their hearts." (47:24)

In another verse we are told:

"A blessed book we have revealed to you." (38:29)

Which means that a book full of benefits called the Quran descended from beyond to the Holy Prophet. Why?

"For them to reflect on its signs." (38:29)

The Quran was not revealed for it to be kissed and put on the shelf. It was revealed for its verses to be reflected and deliberated on.

"And for the possessors of understanding to bear (the reality) in mind." (38:29).

These verses and tens of other verses which emphasize reflection on the Quran, all confirm the legitimacy of explaining the Quran, but not explanations or commentaries (*tafasir*) that are based on desires and inflated egos. On the contrary, they must be on a just and honest basis with no personal motivation. When we reflect fairly and honestly and with no private motivations on the Quran, it is not essential for us to be able to understand all its issues.

Here, the Quran is similar to nature. There are many mysteries in nature that have not been solved, and, in the present circumstances, there is no way we can solve them. Yet these mysteries will be solved in the future. Moreover, in our understanding of nature, we conform our reflection to nature the way it is, not to nature the way we want it to be. The Quran is a book like the book of nature that was not revealed for a single period. If such had been the case, all the mysteries of the Quran would have been discovered and this heavenly book would have lost all its allure, its freshness, and effectiveness. However, as it stands, the talent of thought and reflection and new discoveries are ever relevant to the Quran, and this is a point which the Prophet and Imams have explained. In a tradition from the Holy Prophet it has been recorded that he tells us: *"A similitude of the Quran, is that of the sun and the moon, and, like these two, it is ever proceeding."*

Which means that the Quran is not fixed, not settled in one place. Similarly, the Holy Prophet has told us: *"The external aspect of the Quran is beautiful while its internal aspect is profound."*

Likewise, it has been recorded from Imam Reda (a.s.) that Imam Sadiq (a.s.) was asked the nature of

the secret in that however much older the Quran becomes and however much more it is recited, its freshness increases. The Imam's reply was that the Quran was not revealed for a special time to the exclusion of other times, nor for a special people to the exclusion of other peoples. The Revealer of the Quran has made it such that—with all the differences in methods of thought, known facts and capacities of reflection that it has encountered, still it remains ahead of the times and of thought. And although during every period its reader meets things he does not understand, yet still it presents enough understandable meanings and concepts to fill the capacity of each particular era.

1. Hafiz and Khayam were two notable gnostics and mystical poets, and each is the author of a Divan (collected works).

Translator's Note

2. Hafizin literally means safe guarders, and in the context used here it means those who "safeguard" the Quran by remembering all of it by heart. Translator's note.

3. In the congress Taqreeb bayn al-mathahib al-islamiyah (Reproachment between the Islamic sects) which was held almost forty-five years ago, and in which the various Islamic sects gathered to put a halt to mutual misunderstandings, some representatives of the Isma'iliyah also intended to take part. However, the Shi'ites and Sunnis who were present were united in the view that the Isma'iliyah are not counted amongst the sects of Islam, and thus they were not give permission to take part.

Part 1: Understanding the Quran Analytically

In this chapter we wish to review the Quran's contents. Of course, if we were to deal with each subject of the Quran separately, we would need about two hundred kilos of paper. So we will deal firstly with the generalities and then with a few particularities.

The Quran has dealt with many issues, and amongst these it has put a lot of emphasis on some and less on others. Amongst the issues which have been raised in the Quran are the God of existence and existence. We must look to see how the Quran has introduced God. Does it introduce Him philosophically or gnostically? Does it have the form of other religious books like the Torah and Bible, or the form of those of India? Or does it enjoy the benefits of an independent style of its own in this important subject?

One of the other issues introduced in the Quran is existence. We must review the way the Quran looks at existence. Does it consider the material existence of creation to be a vain toy or does it consider it to have validity? Does it consider the currents of existence to be based upon a chain of principles and laws, or does it count them as being haphazard so that no one thing is the cause or condition of any other thing?

Amongst the general issues raised in the Quran is the issue of the human being. The view of the Quran towards the human being must be analysed. Does the Quran speak optimistically about the human being, or is it pessimistic about him? Does it count him as insignificant or does it maintain for him honour and respect?

Another issue is the issue of the human society. Does the Quran credit human society with a personality of its own or does it only take into account the personality of the individual? In the view of the Quran, does society have life, death, progress, and retrogression, or are these only considered true of the individual? And here, the issue of history is raised. What is the Quranic view about history? What does the Quran see as being the influential forces of history, and to what extent does the individual have an effect on history?

There are many other questions that are raised in the Quran, and amongst these is the view of the Quran towards itself. Then there is the issue of the Prophet and how the Quran introduces him. Another issue is how the Quran describes the believer, what characteristics it describes him as having, and so on. Furthermore, each of these general points has its own special branches. As an example, when discussing the human being we have no choice but to branch into human ethics. Or, when we are discussing the issue of society, we have to talk about inter-individual relationships, social distinctions and classes, *amr bil-ma'ruf wa nahyan al-munkar*¹, and so on.

How Does the Quran Introduce Itself?

In analysing the Quran's contents, it is better to start by looking to see how the Quran introduces itself. The first point that the Quran makes about itself is that its words and phrases are the Word of God. The Quran makes it clear that its composer was not the Prophet and that he only relayed and explained what was revealed to him through the Holy Spirit, the angel Gabriel.

Another explanation that the Quran makes about itself is its message, which consists of guiding the sons of mankind on the path from darkness to light:

"A book that we revealed to you to bring mankind out of darkness into light." (14:1)

Without doubt, one of the truest forms of this darkness is ignorance, and the Quran carries mankind from this darkness to the brilliance of knowledge. If, however, all the forms of darkness could be considered as solely ignorance, philosophy could also have performed this urgent task. However, there exist other forms of darkness which are at levels of darkness more dangerous than the darkness of ignorance, the fighting of which is outside the jurisdiction of philosophy. Amongst these forms of darkness are the worship of material benefits, selfishness, enslavement to desires, and so on, which are counted as being amongst the forms of individual and ethical darkness. There are also similar forms of social darkness such as oppression and discrimination, and so on. In Arabic the word *zulm*, the equivalent of which in English is injustice and oppression, is from the root of "darkness" (*zulmah*), which shows that it is a form

of social and spiritual darkness. Opposition and struggle against these forms of darkness is the responsibility of the Quran and the other heavenly books.

The Quran, in an address to the Prophet Moses (a.s.) says:

"To bring out your people from darkness into light." (1:4-5)

This darkness is the darkness of the oppression of Pharaoh and his clique, and the light the light of freedom and justice.

A point which the Quranic commentators have called attention to is that whenever darkness has been mentioned it has been done so in the plural form with the definitive prefix "al" (*alef* and *lam*), and thus includes all types of darkness. Light, on the other hand, is always mentioned in the singular, and this indicates that the right path is no more than one, while the ways of deviation and damage are many.

In this manner the Quran defines its goal: the tearing apart of the chains of ignorance, deception, oppression, ethical and social corruption, and, in a word, the destruction of all the forms of darkness, and guidance towards justice, goodness and light.

Understanding the Quranic Language

Another issue is the issue of understanding the language of the Quran and how to read it. Some people have the idea that to read the Quran means just to recite it with the intention of earning divine rewards (*thawab*), without perceiving anything of its meaning. They continually recite the whole Quran over and over again, but when asked whether they know the meaning of what they have recited, they are unable to answer. To recite the Quran is good and necessary from the point of view of it being the means for understanding the meaning of the Quran, not simply as a means of divine rewards in itself.

Perceiving the Quran's meaning also has particulars which must be observed. In studying many books, what the reader learns is a chain of fresh ideas which were previously unknown to him. Here, it is only the reader's reason and power of thought and reflection that becomes occupied. Coming to the Quran, there is no doubt that it must be read with the intention of learning. The Quran itself makes this clear:

"A blessed book, we have revealed to you, for them to reflect on its signs (ayat) and for the possessors of understanding to bear (the reality) in mind." (38:29).

One of the Quran's duties is to teach and instruct. Here, the Quran addresses itself to human reason, speaking in the language of logic. Apart from this language, however, the Quran also has another language in which it addresses not reason but the heart. This language is the language of emotion. Whoever wants to understand the Quran and become intimate with it must be acquainted with both these two languages, and must benefit from them both side by side. To separate these two languages, one from the other, would be a source of errors and mistakes, damage and loss.

That which is termed *the heart* consists of feelings that are extremely great and profound, which exist in the interior of the human being, and which are sometimes called "feelings of existence", i.e. the feeling of the relation between the human being and absolute existence.

Anyone who knows the language of the heart and addresses a person with that language – appealing to the heart – animates that person from the very depths of his being. In such a case, it is no longer merely the person's thought that is affected, but the whole of his existence. As a sample of the language of the heart perhaps we can cite music. All the different types of music are in one way alike, which is in the fact that they affect human emotions. Music excites the human soul and puts the human, emotionally, in a special world.

Of course, the types of feelings and excitement that are produced depend upon the types of music, and are varied. It is possible for one kind of music to deal with courage and valour and speak to the human in this language. We all know how military airs and songs are performed on battlefields and how sometimes the effect of such songs is so strong that it persuades soldiers who were previously too afraid to leave their bunkers to go forward in the face of grave enemy attacks and meet the enemy on the open field.

A different type of music will possibly deal with sensual emotions and invite the human to weakness and abandonment and submission to vice and corruption. It has been seen how great the effect of music is in this field; perhaps nothing else can have such an affect in breaking down the walls of chastity and morality. Other instincts and feelings, when things are said in the language of these emotions – and it makes no difference whether they are said by means of music or other than music – can also be brought under control and directed.

One of the most sublime instincts and emotions of the human being is his religious feeling and God-seeking nature, and what the Quran attends to is this holy and superior emotion.

The Quran itself contains the instruction that it is to be recited finely and beautifully, for it is in this way that the Quran speaks directly to the human's divine nature (*fitrat*) and conquers it.² The Quran, in describing itself, maintains that it has two languages. Sometimes it introduces itself as being a book of logic, reason, and reflection, and sometimes a book of emotion and love. In other words, the Quran is not only the food of human reason and reflection, but is also the food of the human heart and soul.

The Quran emphasizes a lot of its subjects with its own special "music". A music the effect of which in raising the profound and sublime feelings of the human being is greater than any other. The Quran instructs the believers to engage themselves during a part of each night in reciting the Quran, and for them to recite it during their prayers, when their attention is directed towards God. Addressing itself to the Prophet, the Quran says:

"O (you) covered-up! Stand the night (in worship) except for a little." (73:1-2)

Most of the Prophet's night was for prayer and a little for sleep. He was to get up and worship his God intimately. And, while in worship, he was to recite the Quran gently; not so fast that its words could not be understood nor with so many pauses that the relation between words would be obscure. He was to recite the Quran deliberately, while paying attention to its contents. And, in a later verse of the same surah, he is told that when he has more need of sleep because of his actions of the day, like trading and *jihad* in the path of God, still he is not to forget to seclude himself in worship.

Amongst the early Muslims, one of the things that was a great source of happiness and a means of spiritual power and of finding internal sincerity and purity was the music of the Quran. The heavenly sound of the Quran, in only a short while, turned such wild people like those of the Arabian Peninsula into firm believers (*mumin*) who could grapple with the greatest powers of the age and overthrow them. Those Muslims viewed the Quran as being not only a book of lessons and instructions, but also as nourishment for their souls and a means of strength and of increasing their faith (*iman*). Alone at night they would recite the Quran and intimately worship and supplicate to their God and, during the day, they would attack the enemy like roaring lions. The Quran had just such an expectation of those who had found their faith. Addressing itself to the Prophet it tells us:

"And do not follow the Kofar (the disbelievers), and struggle against them with it (the Quran) strivingly, mightily." (25:52)

The Prophet was not to listen to the guile of his enemies nor submit on their terms, he was to stand against them and fight and struggle (*jihad*) against them with the weapon of the Quran, and be sure of being victorious. The story of the Prophet's life itself explains this verse. Alone with no support, he stood up with only the Quran in his hand, yet the Quran became everything for him. It provided soldiers for him, supplied him with arms, prepared his forces and, finally, it subdued his enemies. It drew individuals towards him from amongst the enemy and caused them to submit before its bringer, the Messenger of God. It is in this fashion, therefore, that it realises its divine and true responsibility.

When the Quran calls its language the language of the heart, it means the heart which it wants to give lustre to, purify and excite, with its signs. This language is not the language of sensual music that sometimes nourishes the human being's animal passions. Nor is it the language of military music and marches that are sung by armed forces and which enthuse and strengthen the qualities of courage and valour. It is the language that made valiant and spiritual defenders of rudimentary Bedouins, about whom it was truthfully said that they carried their knowledge, their vision, their clear thinking and their divine and spiritual perceptions on their swords, and used these swords in the path of these thoughts and ideas. For those Muslims, there were no private issues, no private interests. Though they were not perfect and were subject to mistakes, yet they were ever in contact with the depths of existence, engaged at night in prayer and during the day in *jihad*.³

The Quran, with its own special characteristic of being a book of the heart and soul, is a book that stimulates the human being, causing tears to flow and hearts to tremble. This has been strongly

emphasized, and is true even of the "People of the Book"⁴:

"The People who received the Book before believe in it, and when it is recited for them they say: We believe that it is definitely the truth from our Lord." (28:53)

In another verse, it has been emphasized that amongst non-Muslims it is the Christians who are nearer to the Muslims than the Jews and polytheists. Then a group of Christians who believed and became Muslims on hearing the Quran are described in this way:

"And when they hear what has been revealed to the Prophet, you see their eyes flowing with tears for what they realise of the truth. They say: 'Our Lord, we have believed, so record us with those who are witnesses (of the Prophet).'" (5:83)

And, in another place, where fundamentally it is the believers who are spoken of, they are described like this:

"God has sent the best announcement; a book the parts of which are (all) similar. The skins of those who fear their Lord shudder from it, and then their skins and hearts become pliant to remembrance of God." (39:23)

In these verses and in many other verses, the Quran shows that it is not simply a book of knowledge and analysis, but that at the same time that it makes use of reason and logic, it also speaks to the feelings, emotions and subtleties of the human soul, thus subjecting the whole human being to its effect.

The Quran's Address

Another of the points that must be realised when reviewing the Quran analytically, is the discerning of the Quran's addressees. In the Quran, phrases like "guidance to the God-fearing (*muttaqqin*)", "Guidance and good-news to the believers", and "To warn the living", have occurred frequently. Here it could be said that those who are pious and cautious of God (*muttaqqin*) do not need to be guided, because they are already pious and, therefore, guided. This question will be answered.

In another place in the Holy Quran we see that it describes itself thus:

"Truly it is a reminder to the (beings of the) worlds, and you will most definitely come to know about it after this."(38:87)⁵

So, a question: are the verses of this book for all the people of the world, or are they only for the believers? Again, in another verse, God the Sublime addresses Himself to the Holy Prophet and says:

"We definitely sent you as a blessing for all the (beings of the) worlds." (21:107.)

A more detailed explanation of this subject will be presented when we discuss history in the Quran. For

the moment, we must say briefly that where the Quran is addressed to all the people of the world, what it really means is that the Quran is not particular to any special group or people.

Whoever travels in the direction of the Quran will be saved. However, in the verses where the book has been mentioned as being for the guidance of the believers and God-fearing (*mumin* and *mottaqin*) it is intended to make the point clear that a certain type of people will finally be brought in the Quran's direction and that a certain kind of people will be put aside. The Quran does not mention any special nation or tribe as being its devotees. It does not say that it takes this side or that side.

Unlike the teachings of other schools, the Quran does not support the interests of a single class or party. It does not say, for example, that it has come to safeguard the interests of a certain class. It does not say that its sole aim is to support the working class or farm labourers. The Quran emphasizes about itself that it is a book for the establishment of justice. About the Prophets it says:

"And We sent down with them the Book and the Balance, for mankind to establish justice."
(57:25)

The Quran wants justice for the whole of mankind, not simply for this class or that class, this nation or tribe or that one. Unlike some schools (fascism, for example), the Quran, in order to attract and maintain a following, does not fan the flames of bigotry and hatred. Similarly, in contrast to other schools (like Marxism), the Quran does not depend upon the human weaknesses of interest-seeking and enslavement to material motivations, nor motivate them by means of their material interests.⁶

The Quran, in the same way that it maintains a noble independence for the conscience of human reason, so it maintains a noble independence for the innate conscience of human nature. And it is on the basis of this truth and justice loving and seeking human nature (*fitrat*) that it places human beings firmly on the path of development and progress. It is for this reason that its message is not limited to the working class or farming class or the deprived and oppressed. The Quran addresses both the oppressor and the oppressed and calls them both to the path of right. The prophet Moses (a.s.) delivers God's message both to the tribe of Israel (*Bani Isra-il*) and to Pharaoh, and wants them both to believe in their Lord and move in His path. The Holy Prophet Muhammad (S) presents his call and message both to the nobles of the Quraysh and to the oppressed figures of Abu Thar and Ammar.

The Quran mentions numerous examples of individuals being provoked against themselves and then turning away from their misleading path of corruption and repenting. Of course, the Quran is aware of the point that the turning away and repentance (*tawbah*) of those who live in ease and comfort is by degrees more difficult than the turning away and repentance of the deprived and oppressed. The second group move in the path of justice by the law of nature, while the first group must overlook the material interests of themselves and their circle, and must trample their desires and wants.

The Quran says that those who believe in it are those whose souls are clean and purified. These believers have been drawn to it solely by the love and desire for truth and justice that is the innate nature

of every human being, not by the ruling of their interests, by material desires and worldly allurements.

1. Amr bil-ma'ruf wa nahyan al-munkar is the Islamic duty of enjoining to what is good and prohibiting from what is bad.

Translator's Note

2. The Imams used to recite the Quran in this fashion, so that passers-by who heard their reciting could not help themselves but to stand, become deeply moved, and fall into tears.

3. Also refer to Nahj ul-balagha, Sermon 191.

4. The People of the Book are the Jews, Christians and, perhaps, Zoroastrians. Translator's Note

5. This verse is one of the wonders of the Quran. When it was revealed, the Prophet was in Meccah and, in reality, was calling the people of a village to the truth. It seemed comic that an individual with such confidence should say that the news of this verse would be heard afterwards, and that they would soon know what this book was to do to the world.

6. Because in this case justice for the believers would no longer be the goal, and the goal would simply be the meeting of their interests.

Part 2: Reason in the View of the Quran

In the previous part we examined the Quranic language, meaning that the Quran uses two languages to deliver its message, the language of logic and the language of emotion. Each one of these has a particular addressee; reason or common-sense (*'aql*) for the first and the heart for the other. In this chapter we will look at the Quran's view towards *'aql*.

We must see whether *'aql*, or reason, in the Quranic view is what is called by the ulema of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the principles of jurisprudence (*'usul ul-fiqh*) a "binding testimony" (*hujjat*) or not. Which means this: if a perception is truly a correct perception that accords to human reason and common-sense, is man to respect it and act according to it? And if a person acts according to it and somehow makes a mistake, does Almighty God hold that person to blame, or is he excused? And, if he does not put it into practice, will he, because of having failed to act according to the clear ruling of reason, deserve to be punished?

Proofs for the Authority of Reason

The issue of the authority (*hujjiyah*) of reason and its place in Islam is certain. From the earliest days until now, amongst the ulema of Islam – apart from a tiny group – none has doubted the authority of reasoning and it has been generally counted amongst the four sources of *fiqh* (jurisprudence).

The Quran's Call to the Use of Reason

Since we are discussing the Quran, it is necessary to take our proofs for the authority of reason from the Quran itself. In various ways, and I especially emphasize that, in various ways, the Quran has endorsed the authority of reason. Only in one instance about sixty or seventy verses can be named in which it has been indicated that such and such matter has been mentioned for reason to reflect on. As an example, we will cite one of the most awe-inspiring verses of the Quran:

"Definitely the lowest animals for God are the deaf, the dumb, those who do not reason." (8:22)¹

Of course, it is obvious that by deaf and dumb the Quran does not mean physically deaf and dumb, but that group of people who do not want to listen to reality, or who listen but do not admit anything with their tongues. An ear that is unable to hear reality and which is only ready to listen to futile nonsense, in the view of the Quran, is deaf. And a tongue that is only used to utter futile nonsense, in Quranic terminology, is deaf.

Those who do not reason, likewise, are those who do not profit from their thinking and reflection. The Quran considers such individuals, who do not become the name human, to be a type of animal and addresses them as "four-footers".

In another verse, while bringing up a subject related to Tawhid, or monotheism, the Quran tells us:

"And not a soul would find belief (iman) without God's permission." (10:100)²

After stating this issue which is obscure and which all minds do not have the capacity of understanding and which, to tell the truth, shocks a person, the verse continues like this:

"And He places filth on those who do not reason." (10:100)

In these two verses, which I have mentioned only for the sake of example, the Quran invites in its special way people to reason. There are also many other verses in which the authority of reason has been similarly endorsed. In other words, the Quran makes statements the acceptance of which, unless reason is accepted as an authority, is not feasible. For example, from its rivals it demands the proof of reason:

"Say, Bring your proof (of reason)." (2:111)

Here it is intended to convey the reality that reason is an authority and a *hujjat*. Similarly, in order to prove the Oneness of the *Wajib al Wujub* ("Essential Existence" i.e. God), the Quran tells us:

"And if amongst the two of them there were gods other than God, they would both definitely be in disorder." (21:22)

Here, the Quran has laid a conditional premise. It has made an exception of the major premise and has

ignored the minor. With all this emphasis on *'aql*, or reasoning, the Quran wants to render null and void this claim of some religions that faith and reason are foreign to each other, that in order to become a believer one must put to sleep one's thought, and make use solely of one's heart in order to discover the Divine Light.

Making Use of the System of Cause and Effect

Another proof of the Quran's maintaining a distinction for reason is its explaining of issues by referral to the relation of cause and effect. The relation of cause and effect and the principle of cause are the foundations of reasonable thought, and which are respected and used by the Quran itself. Even though the Quran speaks to us on behalf of God the Almighty, who is the Creator of the order of cause and effect, and even though it speaks to us from the beyond, to which cause and effect is inferior, still the Quran does not overlook to mention this worldly system of cause and effect and considers the world's realities and manifestations to be subject to it. As an example, take a look at this verse:

"God does not change the conditions of a people until they change their own conditions." (8:17)

Here, the Quran wants to tell us that though it is correct that fate rests with the Will of God, yet God does not impose fate on man from over and above man's choice, decisions and actions, and does not act indifferently. Fate also has a system or order, and God changes the fate of no society for no reason, and He only makes a change when they themselves make a change in what is related to them, like their ethical and social orders, and so on.

On the other hand, the Quran encourages Muslims to study the conditions of previous peoples and the events that befall them, and to take a warningful lesson. It is clear that if the events that befell the different tribes and nations and social orders were imposed indifferently and incidentally from above, there would be no meaning in studying their fates and being advised by them. By this emphasis the Quran wants to remind us that fate is subject to the rule of a single system or order. So that, if the conditions of a society are the same as the conditions of a previous society, the fate awaiting that society will be the same as that which befell the previous society. In another verse the Quran tells us:

"How many townships have we destroyed while they were (engaged) in injustice and oppression (zulm) and (how many) wells and palaces deserted?" (22:44)

Then the Quran asks why the people of all later ages do not wish to travel on the land and study and take lessons from what has happened before. In all those matters, there is a tacit acceptance of the order of cause and effect, and to admit the relation of cause and effect is to accept the authority of reason.

The Philosophy of the Commands

The Philosophy of the Commands³

One of the other proofs for the authority of reason being the Quranic view is that it mentions a philosophy for its commands (*ahkam*). The meaning of this is that the commands which are given are the result of a best interest having to be met. The ulema of *usul ul-fiqh* (the principles of jurisprudence) say that best interests and forms of corruption are amongst the causes of the *ahkam*. For example, in one place the Quran tells us to stand up for the prayer while, in another place, it also mentions its philosophy:

"The prayer definitely prevents the obscene and the rejected." (29:25)

The Quran mentions the effect of the spirit of the prayer in terms of the human being becoming elevated and, due to this elevation, becoming averse to obscenities and evils and avoiding them. Similarly, the Quran mentions fasting and, after commanding its performance, tells us:

"The fast is written for you, as it was written for those before you, for you to be cautious of God." (2:183)

And it is the same way with the other commands, like zakat and jihad and so on, each of which are explained in relation to the individual and the society. In this way the Quran gives to the *ahkam*, though they are from the beyond, a worldly, earthly cause and wants the human being to reflect about them until the essence of the subject becomes clear for him, rather than thinking that they are entirely a kind of code beyond the range of human thought.

Combatting the Errors of Reason

Another thing that proves the distinction that the Quran maintains for reason, and which is more emphatic, is the Quran's struggle against the problems of reason. In order to explain this subject, we must explain another one in preparation.

In many, many instances, the human mind and thought encounters mistakes. This is a thing which is prevalent among us all. Of course, it is not only limited to reason, for desire and also cause errors.

The faculty of sight, for example, can manifest tens of faults and defects. However, in the faculty of reason, many is the time when one uses one's reason and makes a deduction, upon which one reaches a conclusion, and later one realises that the basis for the deduction was faulty. Here the question arises as to whether, due to having used one's mind wrongly in a few instances, one must put one's reason to sleep, or whether one must use a special means to find the mistakes of one's mind and thus prevent them?

In reply to this question, it was the Sophists who first said that to rely on reason is not permissible, and that to reason at all is sheer nonsense. Here the philosophers gave the Sophists many chain breaking replies, amongst which is the one that the other senses make mistakes just like reason, yet no one rules that they must be put to sleep and not used anymore. Because to lay aside reason was not possible, the great thinkers decided to block the way to mistakes. In reviewing this possibility, they became aware that every line of reasoning is formed of two parts: essence (*madi*) and form (*surat*). It is exactly like a building in which materials like cement, brick, plaster, iron and so on have been used (essence), and which has taken the shape of a building (form). In order for the building to be well and perfectly built, it is both necessary that suitable materials be foreseen for it, and also that the plan be correct and complete.

In reasoning deductions, too, in order to ensure their correctness, it is necessary for both their essence to be correct and also their form. In order to get a correct view of the form or shape of reason and to judge it correctly, the Aristotelian logic, or formal logic, came into being. The duty of this formal logic was to discern the correctness or incorrectness of the form or construction of reasoning, and this helps the mind to prevent itself from meeting faults in its line of reasoning.

The main point, however, is that in order to secure the correctness of a deduction, this formal logic is not enough, for it only safeguards one aspect. In order to secure the correctness of the essence of the (theorems of the) deduction, we also have a need of what we can call "essential logic" (*mantiq madi*); meaning that we need a standard by which to assess the quality of the substance of thought.

Thinkers like Bacon and Descartes strived to do the same for *essential logic* as Aristotle did for formal logic. Here too, as far as possible, standards were produced which, although being generally unequal to the logic of Aristotle, were still able to help the human to some extent and prevent him from faults in his reasoning. However, perhaps you will be amazed when you learn that the Quran has also presented points in order to prevent man from mistakes in his reasonal deductions, points which have precedence in excellence compared to the inquiries like those of Descartes, and also excellence in precedence.

The Quranic View of the Sources of Error

One of the causes that the Quran mentions for faults and errors is that probability is taken for certainty.⁴ If a person ties himself to the principle that he will follow certainty and not accept probability in the place of certainty, he will not make mistakes.⁵ The Quran greatly emphasises this matter, and, in one place, even makes it clear that one of the biggest occasions for error is this same following of probability. Or, in another place, the Quran addresses the Prophet thus:

"If you follow most people of the earth they (would) mislead you from the Path of God, for they follow (what is) only probability." (6: 117)

And in another verse, we are told:

"And do not follow what you have not knowledge of." (17:36)

Throughout the whole history of human thought, it was the Quran that was the first to make this point for man and prohibit him from this type of mistake.

The second source of error in essential reasoning, which occurs especially in social affairs, is blind imitation (*taqlid*). Many people are such that whatever their society believes, they also believe. That is, solely for the reason that something is accepted in their society or by the preceding generations, they also accept that thing.⁶

The Quran tells us that we are to measure each issue with the standard of reason, and neither accept whatever our grandfathers did as a binding authority nor reject their examples entirely. People have accepted many things from the past which were mistakes in their own time, while there are many things that were introduced ages ago and which are right and correct, but which, because of ignorance, people have not accepted. In accepting or rejecting these things we must seek the help of reason and reflection, not blindly adhere to imitation, to blind *taqlid*. The Quran has predominately compared the following of fathers and grandfathers to reason and thought:

"And when it is said to them 'follow what God has sent down', they say 'on the contrary, we follow that which we found our fathers upon.' Even if their fathers reasoned not a thing, nor were truly guided?" (2: 170)

The Quran emphasizes that the age of an idea is neither a proof of its being out of date and incorrect, nor of its being correct and valid. There is a way for material things to become out of date, but the realities of existence, no matter to what extent they witness the passing of time, never become ancient and dated. A reality like "Definitely God does not change the conditions of a people until they change their own conditions" for as long as the world is still the world, is firmly fixed, established, relevant and true.

The Quran says that we must meet problems with the force of reason and thought. A correct idea or belief must not be rejected simply on the grounds that others do not give it their stamp of approval, and nor must a belief or idea be accepted simply because it pertains to some important and famous personality. In every area, the individual must engage himself in investigation and a thorough review of the issues that face him.⁷

Another influential factor in causing mistakes, and which the Quran mentions, is the following of inflated egos and desires, and having self-centered motivations.

Whatever the individual thinks about, until he gives himself neutrality and freedom from the evils of self-interest and motivation, he cannot think correctly. That is, reason or common-sense can only work correctly in the environment in which there is no selfishness in action. Let me cite you a well-known story about Allamah Hilli which supports this fact:

Allamah Hilli was once asked the following problem in *fiqh* (jurisprudence) – if an animal dies in a well and this results in the unclean (*najas*) dead body remaining in the well, what must be done with the water of the well?⁸

As it happened, an animal had fallen into the well of Allamah Hilli's house at that moment and he was obliged to deduce this law for himself too. There were two possible ways the law could be deduced. The first was that the well had to be blocked up and never used again, and the other was that a certain amount of water had to be taken out of the well for the rest of the water, having mixed with the fresh water that would naturally come to replace it, to be used with no problem. Allamah Hilli was aware that he could not give a completely impartial verdict on this issue, for his own interests were involved. First he gave the instruction that his own well was to be blocked up, and then, with an easy spirit and released from the pressure and whisperings of his "self", he deduced his verdict. The Quran mentions allegiance to selfish desires many times, but we will satisfy ourselves with one instance. The Quran tells us:

"So they follow only probability and what their 'selves' greedily desire." (53:23)

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1. "Animals" in this verse is the translation of the Arabic word *dawab* which includes insects, but its usage is limited to servile, four-footed animals like the horse, donkey, cow and mule.
 2. To prevent any misunderstandings, perhaps it is necessary to note that this verse is one that denotes a quality of God; the quality of His giving to man the permission to make the choice of whether to believe or not. Religion totally belongs to God, and no one can intrude into this affair of His without His permission. However, the style of the verse tells us that this permission is not granted to those who do not reason. The filth referred to is the opposite of faith (*iman*), like doubt and misguidance. See also Quran 6: 125. Translator's note.
 3. Commands (*ahkam*) are the feature of Islam which make up the Islamic legislation (*shari'ah*) and which are generally described as the commands which regulate the Muslim's actions in his life and which give order (*nazm*) to his life. Translator's note.
 4. This is exactly the same as the first of Descartes' rules, which says that he accepts nothing without making a thorough review and that if a probability is faced with an opposing probability, he will not accept that probability. And this is the correct meaning of certainty.
 5. Of course, it must be realised that where certainty cannot be acquired, probability and likelihood must be taken into consideration. Not as being certainty, however, but as being just what they are, probability and likelihood. To take them as being certainty results in mistakes.
 6. This subject is also contained in one of Bacon's works, and where he mentions what in his view is an idol, which he calls the idol of society or the idol of the populace, his meaning is this same blind following and blind imitation.
 7. The issue of imitating one's forefathers, the leading figures of society, the fashion of the times or the tendency of society, must not be confused with the imitation (*taqlid*) of the most learned and just *mujtahid*, which is discussed in *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and which is obligatory. The *taqlid* of *fiqh* is based on the benefitting from the specialised knowledge of a very special man, and relates solely to actions, not to thoughts and beliefs.
 8. Perhaps it is necessary to explain that cleanliness of water is a very important issue in Islam, while dead bodies of animals are dirty and impure (*najas*), and pollute all they come into wet contact with. In this case, therefore, the cleanliness and usefulness of the well was in question. Translator's note

Part 3: The Quranic View of the Heart

Perhaps there is no need to explain that what is termed in literature and gnosis (*irfan*) as "the heart" is not the organ which lies in the left side of the body and which, like a pump, sends blood flowing through the various arteries and veins:

"Certainly in this is a sure reminder for whoever has a heart." (50:37)

It is clear that what is meant by heart is a sublime and distinguished reality which is totally different from the organ of the body having the same name. Again, in the Quran, we are told:

"There is an illness in their hearts, so God increases them in illness." (2:9)

The cure for this illness is not to be had from a heart specialist. If a doctor could cure these kinds of illnesses, he would undoubtedly have to be a soul specialist.

Definition of Heart

So what is the definition of this heart? In reality, the answer to this question must be looked for in the depths of the human essence. While the human being is a single existence, he has hundreds and thousands of secondary existences. The human "I" consists of countless thoughts, longings, fears, hopes, loves, and so on. These are all like rivers and streams which join together in one special place. This special place is a deep, profound sea, the depths of which no aware human has claimed to be informed of.

Philosophers, gnostics (*urafa*) and psychologists have each turned their attention towards the depths of this sea, and each succeeded in discovering a fraction of its secrets. Yet perhaps it is the gnostics who have been the most successful in this field. That which the Quran calls the heart consists of the reality of this ocean, to which are joined all the streams and waterways that we call the human soul, amongst which is reason (*'aql*) itself.

Whenever the Quran speaks about revelation (*wahye*), it never mentions reason. On the contrary, it is always concerned with the Prophet's heart. The meaning of this is that the Prophet did not obtain the Quran through the power of reason and logical deductions, for it was the Prophet's heart that had reached a stage beyond our comprehension, and it was at this level that he found the ability of perceiving the sublime realities of the Quran. Verses, signs, *'ayat* of Surah *Najm* and Surah *Takwir* explain this to some extent.¹

The Quran, where it speaks of revelation and of the heart, explains things on a level above reason, yet still it does not contradict it. The Quran in these instances explains a view that is above reason, to the

comprehension of which reason has no path.

The Characteristics of the Heart

The "heart", in the Quranic view, is also a means of knowledge and understanding. The addressee of a part of the Quran's message is the heart. A part that only the ears of the heart can hear, and which no other ear can detect. Thus the Quran lays heavy emphasis on safeguarding and perfecting this means, this important tool. Repeatedly in the Quran we come across issues like the purification of the self (*tazkiyat-an-nafs*) and the enlightening and cleansing of the heart!

"Definitely has succeeded He who purifies it." (91:9)

"No, on their hearts is a kind of rust for what they were doing." (83: 14)

And, about enlightening the heart, we are told:

"If you are cautious of God, He will place for you (the light of) discernment." (8:29).

Or, in another verse:

"And those who strive in Our path, We will place Our path before them." (29:29)

Correspondingly, that the human's condemnable deeds and actions pollute his soul and take away his pure attractions and desires has also been repeatedly mentioned in the Quran. The faithful are cited as supplicating:

"Our Lord, do not deviate our hearts after having guided us."(3:7)

And, when describing those who do bad:

"No, what they were doing has rusted their hearts." (83:44)

Or,

"Because they deviated, God caused their hearts to deviate." (61:5)

The Quran similarly speaks about hearts being locked and sealed and becoming cruel:

"God has put a seal on their hearts and their hearing and a covering on their sight." (2:7)

"And We put a screen over their hearts so they cannot understand it." (6:25)

"Thus does God seal the hearts of the disbelievers." (7: 101)

"So their hearts hardened, and many of them became wicked." (57: 16)

All of this shows that the Quran maintains a high spiritual current for the human being and considers it necessary for each human individual to keep his heart safe and healthy. In addition, due to the fact that in a corrupt social current the efforts of an individual to stay clean and pure will mostly be futile and come to nothing, the Quran stresses that the human being use all his efforts in order to purify and sanctify his social environment. The Quran clearly states that the loves, faiths, insights and sublime attractions, together with the effects of the Quran and the advices which are accepted with it, all depend on the human being and human society remaining free from the filth of slavery to desires, of acting like animals, of promiscuousness, and so on.

The history of mankind shows that whenever a ruling power intends to place a society under its authority and exploit it, it strives to corrupt that society. To do this, it increases the facilities and means of promiscuousness for the members of the society, encouraging that society to promiscuousness. A warningful sample of this filthy system is the disaster that overtook the Muslims of Muslim Spain – which is counted as having been one of the sources of the Renaissance and the most advanced civilization of Europe.

The Europeans, in order to remove Spain from the authority of the Muslims, began their work by corrupting the spirit and ethics of the young Muslims. As far as they possibly could, they flooded the Muslims with the means of amusement, pleasure and permissiveness, which went to the extent that even the army commanders and government officials were deceived and polluted. In this fashion, they were able to do away with the strength, will, courage, faith and spiritual sanctity of their Muslim foes and turn them into weak, despairing creatures addicted to lust and alcohol.

It is crystal clear that to triumph and prevail over such people is no task at all. The Europeans, in revenge for the three, four hundred year Muslim government, took such a revenge that history is ashamed to record it. The very Christians who, in accordance with the teachings of Christ (a.s.), were duty bound to turn the other cheek, created such a sea from the blood of dead Muslims that they outdid even Ghengis Khan and perhaps the crusaders. However, the defeat of the Muslims was the result of the corruption of their own souls and their failing to act in accordance to the Quran and its teachings.

In our own days, too, wherever exploitation places its ugly foot, it relies on this very point that the Quran has warned about, striving to immerse the hearts in corruption. Once the heart has become corrupted, reason is rendered useless, and this becomes the greatest chain that the wrists and ankles of the human being can be bound by. Thus we see that exploitation and capitalism do not fear to open schools and universities, yet we notice that they use all their strength and resources to corrupt and spoil the hearts and souls of the students. They are well aware of the fact that a heart and soul which is sick offers no resistance, and merely submits to every kind of baseness and exploitation.

The Quran gives great importance to the nobility and sanctity of the spirit of society. In one sacred verse we are told:

"Cooperate in righteousness and piety (taqwa) and do not cooperate in sin and enmity." (5:2)

The first point that this verse indicates is that we are to do good and sacred things and not do foul and filthy things, while the second point is that we are to perform good works as a society in groups and not just individually.

There are two or three traditions about the heart which I will also relate to you, sayings of the Prophet and Imams which will give a good conclusion to this subject. In the books on the Prophet's life it is written that one day a man approached the Prophet and said to him that he had some questions he wanted to ask. The Prophet asked him whether he wanted to be given the answers or if he wanted to ask. The man said he wanted the answers. The Prophet told him, "You come to ask me the meaning of good and beautiful (behaviour) and bad and foul."

The man admitted that this was, in fact, what he had come to ask. The Prophet knocked three fingers on the man's chest and told him to ask the answer from his own heart, and added, "This human heart is made in such a way that it is linked with beauty and fineness; with beauty it becomes restful and easy, but with bad and evil it becomes upset and restless."

Just as a matter that is not homogenous with the human body which enters the body causes it to become upset and unsettled, and the work of the various organs to become disarranged, so the human soul becomes disarranged and upset by unworthy actions.

That which within us is called a troubled conscience stems from this absolute lack of homogeneity between the soul and bad, unworthy actions. *"Seek the opinion of your heart, even if judges give their opinion (to the contrary)."*

What the Prophet has said here is that if a person really seeks the truth and, in order to seek the truth, makes himself neutral and unaligned, his heart will never betray him. On the contrary, it will guide him on the correct path. Fundamentally, for as long as the human being is a sincere seeker of truth, whatever comes to him is the truth and reality. Of course, this is a subtle point which predominately leads to mistakes. Whenever the human being is drawn to the path of misguidance, the reason is that, from the outset, he had a special motive, and was not seeking truth purely for the sake of truth.

In reply to the person who asked the meaning of "righteousness", the Prophet told him that, if he really was in pursuit of "righteousness", he was to know that whatever makes his heart content and his conscience untroubled is righteousness, while whenever he was desirous of a thing that brought no peace to his heart, he was to be sure that that thing was sin.

Similarly, the Prophet was asked about faith (*iman*). The Prophet said in reply: *"The person who whenever a bad deed is committed, feels discomfort and regret and, whenever a good deed is committed, feels glad and happy, is endowed with faith."*

It is narrated from Imam Sadiq (a.s.) that: *"A believer is one who, whenever he is freed from speech related to the world, feels the sweetness of Divine love in his heart, and then it seems to him that the world is very trivial and, with all his being, he longs to quit this (material) world and leave it behind. And this is a reality which God's Guardians (awliya) have proved with their lives."*

In the history of the life of the Prophet, it is written that one day, after the morning prayer, the Prophet went to see the people who were called *ashaba suffah*. These were the poor Muslims of Medina who had no worldly possessions at all and who lived alongside the Prophet's mosque in Medina. The Holy Prophet looked at one of them, who was called either Zayd or Hareth ibn Zayd, and saw that he looked lean and ill, and that his eyes were sunken. "How are you?" asked the Prophet. "I am passing this morning as one of the certain (*ahle yaqin*)", he replied.

"A great claim" the Prophet told him, "what are its proofs?"

"The proofs of my state of certainty is that my sleep is taken from me at night, and I am always fasting during the day. And I spend the nights till morning in worship."

"This is not enough", the Prophet told him. "What else?"

"O Rasul" the man said, "Now I am in such a state that it seems as if I am seeing the people of Paradise and the people of Hell and hearing their voices. If you give me permission, I will relate to you the inner states of your companions."

"Enough, enough", said the Prophet, "but tell me, what is your aspiration?"

"Jihad fi sabilillah" said the man, "(armed) struggle in the path of God."

The Quran states that purifying the heart gives to man such a position that as said by Amir ul-Muminin (a.s.), *"If the screen is taken away from in front of him, nothing would be added to his certainty."*

That which the Quran has in view in its teachings is the culturing of human beings who will profit both from knowledge and reason and also from the means of the heart, and use them both in the best manner in the path of truth; human beings the perfect examples of whom are our Prophet and Imams and their true and devoted pupils.

1. In Surah Najm (53:2-11) we read:

"Nor does he (the Prophet) speak from desires, it is nothing other than revelation descended, taught him by the Extreme in Power, the Lord of Strength; so he was shown (created) perfection, which was on the highest horizons. Then he drew near, and he bowed; he became as close as two bows, or nearer. So He revealed to His servant that which He revealed. The heart did not mistake in what he saw."

The Quran states all this in order to show that the level of these matters is beyond that of the workings of reason. Here the

subject is seeing and culminating. Or, in a verse of Surah Takwir (71: 18–24) we read: "Surely it is the word of a noble messenger".

The Quran was sent by God the Almighty by means of an angel to the Prophet. "Master of Might, trusted by the Lord of the 'Arsh," and, therefore, of all of existence, which descends from the 'arsh and which we know so little about. "Obeyed and trusted; your companion is not insane", i.e. because you do not consider his words to accord to your logic, you think him mad, but you are wrong. "He certainly saw him on the clear horizon", "He is not miserly with the unseen", he does not keep what he experiences to himself, for his own benefit; what he is relating is his own clear and certain experience.

2. The author has explained elsewhere that Islam maintains a difference between attachment to the world and making it the centre of all of one's attractions, hopes and aspirations. See *Religion and the World*, also published by Besat Foundation. Translator's note.

Al-Qur'an Al-Kareem (R&D) Organisation

"This Book, no doubt, is a guide to those who guard against evil." – Al-Qur'an, 2:2

Prophet Muhammad (May Allah's Peace and Benediction be upon him) instructed that the Qur'anic teachings should always be cherished through their active and constant use for sustaining and enhancing viability of Islamic Society. This directive has been subsequently reiterated time and again by the pious Imams (May Allah's Peace be on them). No doubt, the Holy Qur'an has been held in highest esteem by Muslims everywhere the last fourteen hundred years.

The Cultural Research Division of the BUNYAD BE'THET promotes and executes research and development projects oriented to the rich Shi'ite manifestations of Islamic Culture. Its activities envisage fruitful contributions to the newly emerging Islamic societal pattern in revolutionary Iran. At the same time, these should result in a meaningful dissemination of the Shi'ite contributions among other (Islamic and Non-Islamic) societies. God-willing, these activities will succeed.

To formulate and implement a meaningful work programme, the above Division has been organised on the basis of self-contained functional sub-divisions. One of these units is Al-Qur'an Al-Kareem (R&D) Organization. Its tasks revolve around the need to promote comprehensive and meaningful revival of Qur'anic Culture at home and abroad. This means ideological and cultural assimilation of the all-embracing guidance concerning human life, as contained in this only Divine-inspired Book of its kind.

Detailed work programme of the Al-Qur'an Al-Kareem (R&D) Organisation will soon be published in the form of a brochure. It will be based on the two requirements summarised below:

1. Establishment of a Documentation Centre for collection, collation and evaluation of historical statements, concerning the Holy Qur'an, of every kind and in every language, throughout the last

fourteen hundred years.

2. Concurrently with, and based on, results of (1) above, identifying subject–areas for further study and analysis, including arrangement of scientific research, with a view to publication of the analytical results and dissemination of selected information for educational purposes.

In this connection, we invite suggestions, guidance and any possible intellectual and/or material contributions from not only Qur'anic experts and Islamic intelligentsia, but similar other committed Muslims with any useful resources at their disposal. With the requested outside assistance in the formulation and realisation of the intrinsically commendable plan for reviving and promoting Qur'an Al-Kareem (R&D) Organisation operational soon.

May God bless the united efforts of all Muslims with success!

Amen.

Ali Islami

BUNYAD BE'THET /Tehran

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