

A Probe into the Meaning of Light in the Qur'an and Hadith

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A Probe into the Meaning of Light in the Qur'an and Hadith

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Abstract

The word light (nur) has been applied in the religious texts to a variety of instances. These instances involve a wide spectrum of beings whose one extreme is the visible light, whilst the other extreme is the divine essence. Entities situated between these two extremes such as intellect, knowledge, faith, divine messengers and their successors, guidance, and the like, have also been referred to as light. Nonetheless, the possession of light by all other beings is by virtue of the perpetual Essence of God.

Preamble

“The Light” is one of the names of God. One of the chapters in the Holy Qur'an has been named after light. The word 'light' has a wide range of applications in the Qur'an and Hadith, and has been used in relation to a variety of things. Although the entities referred to as light vary in essence from one another, they have been referred to as such due to the presence of some distinctive features in every one of them.

This paper aims to examine the most distinguished instances of light in the view of the Holy Qur'an and the narrations, and subsequently to uncover the connection between them.

Definition of 'Light'

Light has been defined in several ways. Some of these definitions represent only the visible light, such as the definition, 'Light are rays that scatter and help the eye to sight'.² Others define light as the very thing that exposes other entities, and reveals their reality to the sight.³ However, it would not be possible, in light of the above definitions, to explain all the instances of light that have appeared in the Islamic texts. The above definitions restrict the reality of light to the visible light only. Thus, there is a need to define light in such a way that it would include all its different instances.

According to another famous definition of light, it is a reality that is self-manifesting and manifests things other than itself.⁴ Although this definition takes in the visible light, it is not limited to it, as it includes all that which is manifest in itself and manifests other things. Hence, this definition is capable of explaining the diverse instances of light.

The different applications of the word 'light'

The first and the simplest experience that we have of light is that of visible light. This is the very perception of light that most people have in common.

The word light has appeared in this connotation in several verses of the Qur'an:

"It is He who made the sun a radiance and the moon a light ..." (10:5)

"...and has made therein the moon for a light ..." (71:16)

"... and made the darkneses and the light ..." (6:1)

According to Ghazali, this conception of light is specific to the ordinary mind, and is relative in nature. He maintains that for a person who is blind, the visible light is neither self-manifest, nor does it manifests things other than itself. Hence, beside the light itself, the observer of it also plays an important role in the process of perceiving light.

Moreover, close scrutiny of the matter leads us to the fact that light is not the cause of perception of the visible entities, rather it is the place (*mahall*) where perception takes place. As a result, it is more appropriate to term the faculty of vision as light than the thing which is sighted.⁵

What is observed here is basically a shift from visible light, as something material, to the light of sight. In order to prove his point, Ghazali cites examples regarding the way the phrase 'light of vision' is commonly used; thus, for example, it is frequently said in the case of a blind person who has lost the light of vision, or it is said regarding the weak vision of a bat.⁶

However, the light of vision itself is deficient in many respects, such as that it can see the visible but not

the invisible; it can perceive the finite but not the infinite; it can sight other things but cannot sight itself; and the like. Nevertheless, there exists within man the spiritual eye which is free from the limitations of the physical eye. It has the ability to sight the visible and the non-visible, that which is far and near, and the material and immaterial.

In general, existence in its entirety falls within the realm of this vision. This spiritual eye is the human intellect (*'aql*). Were we to compare between the sensual perception and that of intellect, it would be more proper to term the intellect as 'light'. The Prophetic narration which says that "God created Adam in His form [or image]" is in fact alluding to the above reality; for the power of intellect in man is a light that far represents the divine light.⁷

Now, close scrutiny on the characteristics of the faculty of intellect leads us to the fact that the intellect, which is the very knowledge and the reality of man, is self-manifest, and it manifests other things for itself. Put differently, man is knowledge in his essence; and one of the features of knowledge is that it is self-manifest and makes other things manifest. It is due to this reason that the Holy Prophet (s) said, "Knowledge is the light that God casts in the heart of whomever He wishes."⁸

In several verses of the Holy Qur'an, knowledge has been referred to as light and radiance:

"... Say, 'Are the blind one and the seer equal? Or are the darkness and the light equal?'"⁹

"The blind one and the seer are not equal, nor darkness and light."¹⁰

Nonetheless, there is a close relationship between the sensual perception, knowledge, thoughts, and the faculty of intellect. Imam 'Ali (a) says in this regard,

*"Intellects are the directors of the thoughts; and thoughts are the directors of the hearts; and the hearts are the directors of the [physical] senses; and the senses are the directors of the bodily members."*¹¹

Now, if knowledge were to be associated with the pursuit for truth, adherence to it, and struggle in its way; and if the bearer of knowledge were to apply his knowledge in the way of his spiritual development and perfection, then such knowledge would culminate in faith (*'iman*). Hence, it is observed in a number of the Qur'anic verses that faith has been termed as light.¹² The following are a few examples:

"... and provided him with a light by which he walks among the people ..." (6:122)

"... and give you a light to walk by ..." (57:28)

"God is the Master of the faithful; He brings them out of darkness into light ..." (2:257)

Ghazali asserts that in the same manner that the physical eye is in need of sunlight to be able to see, likewise the intellect or the spiritual eye is in need of some light to be able to visualize. This spiritual light is the Holy Qur'an.¹³

In a number of verses, the Qur'an has referred to itself as light.¹⁴ Consider the following verses:

“So have faith in God and His Apostle and the light which We have sent down ...” (64:8)

“... and We have sent down to you a manifest light.” (4: 174)

“... and help him and follow the light that has been sent down with him ...” (7: 157)

The aim of such expressions is to make clear that the Qur'an is a light that illuminates for mankind the path of success in life; the path that man ought to traverse if he were to attain felicity and perfection.¹⁵

As the last of all divine messages, Islam revolves around the Holy Qur'an. Islam and the Qur'an are inseparable. In some verses of the Qur'an, the word 'light' has been used to denote the religion of Islam.¹⁶

“They desire to put out the light of God with their mouths ...” (9:32)

“... God guides to His Light whomever He wishes ...” (24:35)

The Prophet of Islam (s) has been referred to in the Qur'an as light. This is because he demarcated the truth from the falsehood by his words and actions, and made clear for mankind the real felicity and perfection through the divine message.

“And as a summoner to God by His permission, and as a radiant lamp.” (33:46)

“... Certainly there has come to you a light from God and a manifest Book.” (5: 15)

The aim of the Holy Prophet, Islam and the Qur'an is to guide mankind towards God and to develop insight in them. Guidance and spiritual insight is considered by the Qur'an as a higher stage of human life that has profound impact in the transformation of the spirit and worldview of man, and in giving him a direction that is divine.

In the following verses of the Qur'an, divine guidance and spiritual insight have been termed as light:¹⁷

“Is he who was lifeless, then We gave him life and provided him with a light by which he walks among the people, like one who dwells in a manifold darkness which he cannot leave? ...” (6: 122)

“[This is] a Book We have sent down to you that you may bring mankind out from darkness into light ...” (14: 1)

Light in the above verses denote guidance, whilst darkness stands for misguidance. A point worthy of note here is that light has appeared in these verses in the singular form (*nur*), whereas darkness is in the plural form (*zulumat*). The wisdom behind this is that guidance is one of the instances of truth (*haqq*), and the reality of truth is that it is one. There is no disagreement or contradiction between the diverse

instances that represent it. On the contrary, misguidance takes on numerous forms that controvert one another, since it originates in following the lowly desires.

The new life attained by the believers as a result of their confidence in the guidance and insight they have acquired shall make them possess light in the hereafter. On the Day of Resurrection, they will pass through the bridge (*sirat*) with the help of this light. The Qur'an has alluded to this reality in a number of its verses:

“The day you will see the faithful, men and women, with their light moving swiftly before them and on their right ...” (57: 12)

“... Their light will move swiftly before them and on their right ...” (66:8)

In the afterlife, not only the light of the believers shall become manifest, rather the Divine Light shall also illuminate the earth. The following verse attests to this reality:

And the earth will glow with the light of her Lord ... (39:69) ADD ARABIC

Some scholars maintain that the word ‘light’ in the above verse denotes justice. 118

Among the other applications of the word light in the Islamic texts is that it has been used to refer to people who are vested with the divine successor ship (*Imamah*) and authority (*wilayah*), especially in the case of ‘Ali bin Abi Talib (a). This is because these personalities have illumined this world by their divine knowledge and authority, and have enlightened the hearts of the believers. 19

It is reported from Imam al-Rida (a) that he said, “God guides to His Light whomever He wishes²⁰ means that ‘God guides to our wilayah whomever He likes’. And “one whom God has not granted any light has no light”²¹ implies that ‘one for whom God has not appointed an Imam in this world has no light in the hereafter, that is, he shall have no Imam to guide him, and to follow him to the heaven’.”²²

One of the Imams of the Ahlul Bayt (a) says regarding the verse ***“So have faith in God and His Apostle and the light which We have sent down”***²³ :

*By God, this light (nur) refers to the Imams from the Progeny of the Prophet until the Day of Resurrection. They are the light of God in the heavens and the earth. The luminosity of their light in the hearts of the believers is even brighter than the sunlight.*²⁴

In another narration, Imam Ali (a) applies the verse God is the Light of the heavens and the earth²⁵ to the Holy Prophet and the twelve Shi'a Imams.²⁶

The well-known verse that discusses ‘light’ in the Qur'an is verse 35 of Surah al-Nur. The word light has appeared five times in this verse. Numerous and diverse interpretations have been offered concerning this particular verse. God has been referred in it as “The Light of the heavens and the earth”. According

to some scholars, it signifies that God is Manifest by Himself, whilst all that exists in the heavens and the earth are manifest because of Him.²⁷

Considering the fact that it is through its existence that an entity becomes manifest for other things, existence would be the most complete representation of the reality of light. On the other hand, since the existence of contingent beings is dependent on the existence of God, He would be the most perfect of all instances of light.

In other words, He is Manifest by Himself and causes all entities other than Him to become manifest. Every being becomes manifest and comes into existence through Him. Therefore, God is the Light through which the heavens and the earth have become manifest. In fact, the verse of light alludes to this reality.²⁸

Therefore, the very basis of manifestation is existence, in the same manner that the basis of concealment is non-existence. God is the only being who exists by Himself, whilst all other than Him have been brought to existence by Him.²⁹ Thus, the relationship between being manifest and existence is inseparable. The degree of manifestation of every being is proportionate to the intensity (*shiddat*) of its existence.

Now, if God is the only being who is self-sufficient in His essence, subsists on His own, and whose existence has no limit, then it follows that His essence is Absolute Light. He is the Light that has no darkness as its opposite. He is the Light of the whole universe, and of the heavens and the earth: ***“God is the Light of the heavens and the earth.”*** He is more manifest than any other thing that is manifest, as He is closer to us than any other thing that is close to us. All other entities are manifest by virtue of His Essence: *“...and by the light of Your face through which all things are illumined.”*³⁰

Every being owes its luminosity to that of the Divine Essence. The Divine Light is immutable and does not wane. It has filled every place and has besieged everything; there is no veil that can stop it from shining. There is no opposite to it, nor does it have any equal. There is no end to it since it does not fade away. No darkness can ever contravene the Divine Light.

Man is unable to see God around him due to his cognitive deficiency. The human cognitive faculty functions in a manner that it can only detect and comprehend something by taking into account the opposite of it. Since God has no opposite, man is incapable of noticing His presence.

A rather strange reality to consider here is that the reason God is always hidden from sight is because He is always evident to it. If He were partially evident and partially hidden, He would not have remained unnoticed from the sight. The Divine plane is above all forms of change, movement, and extinction. It is due to this very reason that He remains hidden from human perception.

The words of the philosophers and mystics that ‘The Divine essence is hidden due to the intensity and severity of His presence’ need to be understood in light of the above explanation. ‘O He Who is hidden

due to the plenitude of His Light, Who is manifest and hidden in His appearance.’³¹ He is hidden in the same respect that He is evident. His being evident is the same as His being hidden.

How beautiful has ‘Ali described this reality when he says, “*Every evident other than Him is hidden, and every hidden beside Him is not evident.*”³² It is God alone who is both manifest and hidden, with the same unity and simplicity of His essence. His essence is not partially manifest and partially non-manifest; rather He is manifest, all of Him, as He is hidden, all of Him.

Put differently, He is manifest in the same respect that He is non-manifest, and His being hidden is exactly the same as His being evident. The primary source of the above reality is the Qur’an itself when it states:

“He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden ...” (57:3), and

“... so whichever way you turn, there is the face of God ...” (2:115).³³

As a result, if the application of the word light in the case of God were to be compared to its application to all other than Him, it would be observed that the word is applied to all beings other than God by virtue of His light, since their very existence is from Him. Therefore, anything other than God cannot be manifest on its own, rather it owes its manifestation to other than itself.

Consequently, this contingent manifestation would naturally be subject to intensity and weakness, and would also be prone to change and extinction. Thus, the word light would be applied to God literally, and to other than Him figuratively; since there is only God in the realm of existence, and all other than Him are bound to disappear:

“... Everything is to perish except His Face ...”(28:88).³⁴

We started our discussion with the visible light, and thereafter moved on, by detracting the limitations of the physical light, to transcendent instances of light until we ultimately reached the real light embodied in the divine Essence. However, this bottom-to-top course of discussion is traversed in perception and at the cognitive level only, otherwise in reality (*thubut*), it is the other way round; it is the Divine Essence which is evident, luminous and manifest by itself at the first instance, and the visibility of all other than God is by virtue of Him:

He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden ... (57:3).

If God is the only light, that is, if He is the only reality that is manifest by itself and makes other things manifest, then, in this case, there will be nothing as light in contrast to God. All other forms of light will be darkness in front of Him, for it is God alone who is, by His very essence, manifest and makes other things manifest. All other entities beside Him are dark and non-existent in their essence. If they are manifest and make other things manifest, it is because God has made them to be so.³⁵

There are other interpretations too offered regarding the verse: ***“God is the Light of the heavens and the earth ...” (24:35).***

According to some exegesis, this verse implies that God is the Owner of the light in the heavens and the earth; this light in the heavens and earth signifies the truth (*haqq*). And the reason light in the above verse has been annexed to the heavens and the earth is either to depict the vastness of the Divine radiance such that it is due to Him that the heavens and the earth have become radiant, or it is to illustrate that the inhabitants of the heavens and the earth derive light from Him.³⁶

The author of Majma’ al-Bayan offers three explanations in relation to the meaning of the sentence “God is the Light of the heavens and the earth”:

1. God guides the inhabitants of the heavens and the earth towards that in which lies their interests.
2. God has illumined the heavens and the earth through the sun, the moon, and the stars.
3. God has adorned the heavens with the angels, and the earth with the Prophets and scholars.³⁷

Fakhr al-Razi maintains that the above verse either means that God is the one who guides the inhabitants of the heavens and the earth, and runs their affairs through His infinite wisdom and clear proofs; or He is the one who creates order and harmony in the heavens and the earth; or He is the one who has illuminated and beautified the heavens and the earth, the heavens with the sun, the moon and the stars, and the earth with the Prophets and scholars.³⁸

It has been reported from Imam ‘Ali that he said, *“God is the Light of the heavens and the earth” denotes that it is Him who disseminated the truth amidst the heavens and the earth, and subsequently, the entire universe became illumined with it.*” This may imply that He it is who irradiated the hearts of the dwellers of the heavens and earth through His Light.³⁹

There is no doubt that the divine light reveals itself through the creation, for everything that comes into being indicates that it has a Creator. All creatures in the universe act as a mirror, each one reflecting the Creator through the level of existence and the ontological qualities peculiar to it. However, God has also manifested Himself to mankind through His legislative guidance embodied in the divine apostleship (*nubuwwah*) and successor ship (*wilayah*). The remaining part of the verse of light that follows the phrase “God is the Light of the heavens and the earth” points to this fact:

The parable of His Light is a niche wherein is a lamp — the lamp is in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star — lit from a blessed olive tree, neither eastern nor western, whose oil almost lights up, though fire should not touch it. Light upon light. God guides to His Light whomever He wishes. God draws parables for mankind, and God has knowledge of all things. (24:35)

There is difference among the exegesis as to the reality of this light that God has attributed to Himself, and the thing to which this light has been compared. The majority of them are of the opinion that light in

this verse symbolizes the Holy Prophet. Thus, it is as if the verse read: ‘The parable of Muhammad, who is the messenger of God, is a niche, the lamp is his heart, and the glass is his chest, that has been compared to the glittering star.’

Again the verse talks about the heart of the Prophet and says that this lamp is lit from a blessed tree, that is Abraham, since most prophets were from his lineage. Nonetheless, the blessed tree could also be interpreted as the revelation (*wahy*).

Muhammad is neither eastern nor western; that is, he is neither a Christian nor a Jew, since the Christians used to pray towards the east, and the Jews towards the west. “Whose oil almost lights up, though fire should not touch it”: the marks of prophethood would almost give evidence to the Prophet’s apostleship even before he declared himself a prophet, or the veracity of his claim to prophethood is nearly to be established even if no miracle were to be seen from him.⁴⁰

It has been reported from Imam Ja’far al-Sadiq that “The parable of His Light...” refers to the Ahl al-Bayt; that is, the Holy Prophet and the twelve Imams after him are the signs that exhibit monotheism (*tawhid*), and guide people towards the religion and what it entails of the obligatory and recommended acts.⁴¹

Imam Muhammad al-Baqir is narrated to have said,

“The niche wherein is a lamp is the light of knowledge situated in the chest of the Holy Prophet, whilst the glass is the bosom of ‘Ali to whom the Prophet imparted his knowledge, hence it moved to his bosom. “Whose oil almost lights up, though fire should not touch it” implies that the learned from the progeny of Muhammad shall soon disclose the truth before he is asked about it. “Light upon light” means that after [the departure of] every individual from the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (a), another Imam – aided with the light of knowledge and wisdom – takes his place. This [succession] has been there in the issue [of imamah] from the time of Adam [and will continue] until the Hour sets in. They are the vicegerents of God on earth and His proof over His creation. The earth is never empty of any one of them at all times.”⁴²

Expounding on the meaning of “Light upon light”, some exegesis maintain that the Qur’an is the Light that God has sent to mankind so that they may seek guidance from it, while upon light signifies the clear proofs that existed before the Qur’an. According to another view, “Light upon light” means that part of the Qur’an clarifies the other part of it.⁴³

Tabrisi offers the following five interpretations regarding the phrase “*The parable of His Light*”:

1. The parable of the divine light through which He guides the believers is the faith (*iman*) that dwells in their hearts.
2. The divine light is the Qur’an which has penetrated into the hearts of human beings.

3. It signifies the Holy Prophet (s). He annexed him to Himself in order to exalt the Prophet's position.
4. Light stands for proofs of monotheism and divine justice which are as clear and evident as light itself.
5. Light implies obedience; that is, obedience to God in the heart of a believer acts as a light.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The world light – in the sense of the radiance that eliminates darkness – has been applied to different things. The most evident instance of light is the visible light which represents a level from among the many levels of the corporal world. The transcendent instances of light are such as the light of knowledge, faith, guidance, Imam, prophet, intellect, and the divine Essence. The common feature that is found in all the diverse instances of light is that it puts an end to darkness and perplexity, brings about illumination and clarity, and identifies distinctly the correct path and goal of perfection.

Therefore, those who are entangled in different forms of darkness and obscurity in this world ought to enlighten themselves with the corresponding forms of light and luminosity so that they may succeed to attain the higher stages of human perfection.

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