

Question 11: Divine Tests

Question: If Allah (awj) is omniscient, why does He need to test mankind?

Brief Answer

As implied by the question, because Allah (awj) is omniscient, the purpose of His tests is not to unveil something hitherto unknown. Rather, the Qur`an and ahadith suggest that these tests serve two purposes. First, they comprise a Divine precedent (*sunnah ilahiyyah*¹) that is in turn based on another Divine precedent that can be termed “universal guidance.”

In particular, Allah (awj) wishes that mankind, by obeying the divine law (*shari`ah*) and struggling through the various circumstances that he encounters in life, will blossom from potentiality to actuality, and will thereby attain the level of perfection that has been intended for him. One of the terms that is used for such tests in Islamic literature is *fitnah* (in this sense this term denotes a “crucible”).

Fitnah literally refers to the process of smelting by which gold is purified. In one *hadith* it is said that people are tested the way gold is tested. The mettle of man is gold ore that is purified in the crucible of Divine tests and guidance. It should be kept in mind though, that in the course of such tests, just as good qualities reach their perfection in the believers, bad qualities also develop to the utmost in disbelievers.

The second purpose that these tests serve is to awaken man from his sleep of heedlessness. The Qur`an explains that one of the purposes of tragedy and disaster is to test man and thereby jar him from his stupor of heedlessness. In a way, tragedy in man’s life serves the same purpose as the ridges that are embossed on some modern motorways and highways that are meant to wake drivers during the monotony of highway driving so they do not fall asleep at the wheel.

There are, in reality, two types of Divine will at play here. One is called the existential will (*al-iradah al-takwiniyyah*) and the other is called the legislative will (*al-iradah al-tashri`iyyah*). Allah’s (awj) existential will is that through Divine tests, both believers and disbelievers be able to actualize their good and bad potentials. On the other hand, his legislative will is that only good potentials be actualized.

Detailed Answer

Divine tests are not designed to unveil something hitherto unknown, since Allah (awj) is omniscient and needs no such unveiling. Rather, they comprise a Divine precedent, that is based on a second Divine precedent called “universal guidance.” By universal guidance, we mean Allah’s (awj) guidance of all creation (whether they be conscious or not), as it relates to man.

To clarify, we must first describe the three types of Divine guidance:

1. One type of guidance is intended only for the most pious people and has been negated from other groups in the following verses of the Qur`an:

“Allah does not guide the wrongdoing ones,”

and

“Allah does not guide the corrupt ones.”

The converse of this kind of guidance is misguidance.

2. Another type of guidance known as “legislative guidance” entails showing someone the path. This kind of guidance addresses both believers and disbelievers, but does not benefit inanimate beings. Examples of this kind of guidance are in the following verses: “We showed him the path while he is either grateful or ungrateful²,” and “As for (the people of) Thamud, we guided them, but they preferred blindness to guidance.”³

3. The third kind of guidance is universal both in terms of the beings who are guided and the resulting guidance and is also called existential guidance. This is the guidance referred to in the following verse:

“Our Sustainer is He who gave everything its existence, and then guided it.”⁴

This verse implies that Allah’s (awj) universal guidance includes all creation, whether conscious or inanimate. In another verse, the Qur`an states,

“who created and proportioned; who determined and guided.”⁵

Here, the verb “to determine” (*taqdir*) entails the facilitation of the appropriate means of a given thing so that it is “guided” to fulfil the purpose for which it was created.

All of creation – whether conscious or inanimate – attains its intended purpose through this third type of existential guidance. However man, who is more than just a physical being living in this material world, requires more than the existential guidance afforded to all creation. He can only attain perfection by choosing his path according to his free will. For this reason, Allah must on the one hand, provide a set of

positive and negative commands entailed in the *shari'ah* (divine law) so that man can choose to either obey or disobey.

On the other hand, Allah (awj) must create “problems” at the individual and societal levels (some of which are caused by human choice and some of which are caused by natural means such as natural disasters) so that man can choose a course of action with respect to these problems. By choosing a course of action with respect to divine law and the aforementioned problems, man actualizes the potential that is hidden within himself, and either proves himself to be worthy of eternal felicity or chastisement. It is for this reason that both the divine law and human tragedy are referred to in Islamic literature by the terms “trial,” “tribulation,” and “test.”

To put it simply, Allah (awj) is like a scientist examining each individual human being. The parameters on which his experiments are based are the *shari'ah* and human tragedy. Through these two variables, a person's station with respect to the level of perfection that was intended for him is determined.⁶

To recapitulate, Divine tests are based on the Divine precedent called universal guidance. Through these tests every person comes to know which abode he will enter: the abode of reward or the abode of chastisement. The Qur'an describes the purpose of these tests in this way: “...so that Allah may purify those who have faith and that He may eradicate the faithless.”⁷

In the course of repeated tests, the superficial faith and deceitful good qualities of the faithless and the hypocrites are extirpated. Another meaning of the “eradication of the faithless” is mentioned in the verse that says, “the (final) outcome will be in favour of the fear of Allah”⁸ and in the verse that reads,

“My righteous servants shall inherit the earth.”⁹

We can recap the positive effects of divine tests in the following two points:

1. They serve to actualize hidden potentials. Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) says: “It is in extreme circumstances that a man's true mettle shows itself.”¹⁰ It is narrated from Imam 'Ali b. Musa al-Rida (ع) that “People are tested as gold is tested, and they are purified as gold is purified.”¹¹ The word *fitnah* refers to the process of smelting gold ore. Gold ore is melted so that its impurities float to the surface and are removed. Likewise the essence of man is like gold that Allah (awj) wishes to purify. Meanwhile, the presence of animal-like qualities such as anger and lust pose a major obstacle to his purification. It is for this reason that Divine tests are considered a means for the perfection of mankind.

In the military, soldiers are required to perform strenuous activities to build their strength. Likewise, Divine tests are meant to strengthen man's inner self. Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) says, “Although Allah knows man better than he knows himself, (He tests him) in order to make manifest those actions by which he earns his reward or punishment.”¹²

2. They also serve to awaken man from his sleep of heedlessness. Allah (awj) tests man both through

tragedy and hardship and by showering him with an abundance of blessings such as power, health, and wealth. Often these blessing deceive a person so much that they threaten to lead to his downfall. Allah (awj) sends tragedy his way, in order to jar him from his stupor so that he can once again discern right from wrong, and so that he remembers that all existence and blessings issue from Allah (awj), whom one should never forget and against whom one should never sin.

Many verses in the Qur`an speak of this aspect of Divine tests¹³. These verses generally use the terms *tadhakkur* (to remind), *tadarru`* (to show humility), and *ruju`* (to return to the path). These concepts link together in the following way: to return to the path that leads to Allah (awj) one must first be reminded of Allah (awj); he must then humble himself before Allah (awj); only then can he truly return to Allah (awj) and better himself. Imam `Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) refers to this Qur`anic truth in the following way: “When Allah’s servants commit a sin, He tests them with hardship until they repent and cease committing sins and heed Allah’s admonishment.”¹⁴

If what we have said so far is true, then one might wonder why Allah’s (awj) prophets (ع), Imams (ع), and saints are tested? The answer to this question is found in a narration of Imam `Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) where he says: “The divine test is a form of discipline for the wrongdoer, a test for the believer, a means to increase one’s station for the prophets, and a means of ennoblement for the saints of Allah.”¹⁵

1. A Divine precedent is a Divine action that is not bound to any specific time, place or people. Rather it is a sort of law the Allah (awj) has issued for Himself in such a way that from the beginning of time into eternity, He always acts according to this law. For example, one of the Divine precedents can be stated like this: “If a people rejects Divine guidance and kills Allah’s (awj) prophets and it becomes apparent that there is no hope that even one person from among them will submit himself to Allah (awj), they must be destroyed.”

2. Surat al-Insan (76), Verse 3:

﴿ إِنَّا هَدَيْنَاهُ السَّبِيلَ إِمَّا شَاكِرًا وَإِمَّا كَفُورًا ﴾

3. Surat al-Fussilat (41), Verse 17:

﴿ وَأَمَّا تُمُودٌ فَهَدَيْنَاهُمْ فَاسْتَحَبُّوا الْعَمَىٰ عَلَى الْهُدَىٰ ﴾

4. Surat Taha (20), Verse 50:

﴿ قَالَ رَبُّنَا الَّذِي أَعْطَىٰ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلْقَهُ ثُمَّ هَدَىٰ ﴾

5. Surat al-A`la (87), Verse 2-3:

﴿ الَّذِي خَلَقَ فَسَوَّىٰ. وَالَّذِي قَدَّرَ فَهَدَىٰ ﴾

6. Surat al-Kahf (18), Verse 7:

﴿ إِنَّا جَعَلْنَا مَا عَلَى الْأَرْضِ زِينَةً لَّهَا لِيَبْتَلُوهُمْ أَيُّهُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا ﴾

Also refer to: Surat al-Insan (76), Verse 2, Surat al-Anbiya` (21), Verse 35, Surat Ali-`Imran (3), Verse 154, Surat al-Fajr (89), Verse 6, Surat al-Taghabun (64), Verse 15, Surat Muhammad (47), Verse 4

7. Surat Ali-`Imran (3), Verse 141:

﴿ وَلِيُمَجِّصَ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَيَمْحَقَ الْكُفْرِينَ ﴾

8. Surat Taha (20), Verse 132:

﴿ وَالْعَاقِبَةُ لِلتَّقْوَىٰ ﴾

9. Surat al-Anbiya` (21), Verse 105:

﴿ وَلَقَدْ كَتَبْنَا فِي الزُّبُورِ مِنْ بَعْدِ الذِّكْرِ أَنَّ الْأَرْضَ يَرِثُهَا عِبَادِيَ الصَّالِحُونَ ﴾

10. Nahj al-Balaghah, Short Saying 217:

فِي تَقْلِبِ الْأَحْوَالِ عِلْمُ جَوَاهِرِ الرَّجَالِ

11. al-Kafi, vol. 1 pg. 370:

سَمِعْتُ أَبَا الْحَسَنِ (ع) يَقُولُ: □ أَلَمْ أَحْسِبِ النَّاسُ أَنْ يَتْرَكُوا أَنْ يَقُولُوا آمَنَّا وَهُمْ لَا يُفْتَنُونَ □ ثُمَّ قَالَ لِي: مَا الْفِتْنَةُ؟ قُلْتُ: جُعِلَتْ فِدَاكَ الَّذِي عِنْدَنَا الْفِتْنَةُ فِي الدِّينِ، فَقَالَ: يُفْتَنُونَ كَمَا يُفْتَنُ الذَّهَبُ، ثُمَّ قَالَ: يُخْلَصُونَ كَمَا يُخْلَصُ الذَّهَبُ.

12. Nahj al-Balaghah, Short Saying 93:

وَإِنْ كَانَ سُبْحَانَهُ أَعْلَمُ بِهِمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَ لَكِنْ لَتُظْهَرَ الْأَفْعَالُ الَّتِي بِهَا يُسْتَحَقُّ الثَّوَابُ وَالْعِقَابُ

13. Surat al-A'raf (7), Verse 94, Surat al-Rum (30), Verse 41, Surat al-Sajdah (32), Verse 21, Surat al-A'raf (7), Verses

30-168, Surat al-Tawbah (9), Verse 126

14. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 143:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَبْتَلِي عِبَادَهُ عِنْدَ الْأَعْمَالِ السَّيِّئَةِ بِنَقْصِ النُّمَرَاتِ... لِيُتُوبَ تَائِبٌ وَيَقْلَعَ مُقْلَعٌ وَيَتَذَكَّرَ مُتَذَكِّرٌ

15. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 4, pg. 235, no. 54:

إِنَّ الْبَلَاءَ لِلظَّالِمِ أَدَبٌ وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِ إِمْتِحَانٌ وَلِلْأَنْبِيَاءِ دَرَجَةٌ وَلِلْأَوْلِيَاءِ كَرَامَةٌ

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