

Question 42: Pre-requisites for understanding the Qur'an

Question: What are the prerequisites for understanding the Qur'an?

Among the basic tenants of Islam is the belief that the Prophet Muhammad (ص) is the final prophet and his religion is the final religion. It follows that the Qur'an must accompany man until the Day of Judgment providing him with guidance. Thus, after the prophethood of Muhammad (ص), there is no excuse left to those who wish to flee from their duty toward Allah (awj).

On the one hand, this book describes itself as "light"¹, "clear"², "a clarifier"³, and "a proof."⁴ It claims with emphasis that it is easy to understand and easy to benefit from.⁵ On the other hand, the Qur'an repeatedly calls its readership to ponder and criticises those who fail to do so.⁶ Our challenge is to find the harmony between these two sets of verses.

The Qur'an is "light" because it originates with the One who is the Light of the Heavens and Earth.⁷ It therefore, is not only luminous, but it illuminates other than itself. It follows that it is "clear" and evident to all. It is a "clarifier" because it also clarifies all that is external to itself. It is a "proof" because it removes all doubt and provides overwhelming proof against anyone who chooses to disbelieve in it.

Its surface meaning is comprehensible to all as attested to by anyone who understands 'Arabic. It uses no confounding words or phrases. It does not employ any strange 'Arabic dialects. It also refrains from using the jargon specific to any particular field that its reader would require specialized knowledge to comprehend it.

The content of the Qur'an is far from the decadence of the Age of Ignorance. It does not speak of lustful desire or power mongering and pillaging. Rather the Qur'an has provided guidance to man from the time it was revealed until now, and will continue to do so until the Day of Judgment. It leads him to the epitome of humanity and everlasting felicity. It leads him to the gnosis and benefaction that lead to the perfection of the soul. It warns him of the lethal danger of saturating one's base desires in worldly

pleasures.

Despite all this, much of the Qur`an's content is supernatural though it has been written using a very material vocabulary. To convey these ideas, it employs parables, stories, vernacular phrases, argumentation, words of admonishment, warnings and promises, and theological proofs. It is for this reason that the Qur`an requires an interpreter. The first exegete of the Qur`an is the Qur`an itself. According to the Qur`an the next interpreter is the Prophet (ص) and then the Imams (ع). In the wake of the Infallibles, scholars have striven to collect ahadith related to the exegesis of the Qur`an.

Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) says, "This is Allah's book. Through it you gain insight. Through it you speak. And through it you hear. Some of its verses explain others. Some of its verses bear witness to others."⁸ It was the practice of the Imams (ع) to bring several disparate verses together in order to derive a law. They would explain the meaning of the verses to their disciples.

The Qur`an states:

"I swear by the places where the stars set. Indeed it is a great oath, should you know. This is indeed a noble Qur`an, in a guarded Book—no one touches it except the pure—gradually sent down from the Lord of the Worlds."⁹

And in another place it says:

"Allah only desires to repel all impurity from you, O People of the Household, and to purify you thoroughly."¹⁰

According to these two verses, it is the Prophet (ص) and his household that are pure and have a comprehensive knowledge of the Qur`an. In other verses the Qur`an introduces the Prophet as its exegete and commands the believers to submit to his command.¹¹

In turn, the Prophet (ص) has introduced the members of his household as the inseparable cohorts of the Qur`an. He informed us that the two can never diverge and that neither one suffices us of the other.¹² For this reason, we not only need to work to understand the Qur`an, but must also struggle to comprehend the traditions of the Infallibles. Accordingly, we must investigate the tools that will enable us to comprehend these two bodies of knowledge and the obstacles we must overcome to comprehend them.

The prerequisites for understanding the Qur`an and ahadith are of two kinds:

1. One must attain a purity of soul and a desire to seek the truth so that he can approach the "pure ones." As the Qur`an says, "Only the humble can be reminded."

From the other side, one must eliminate arrogance and prejudice and approach the Qur`an with fear and humility, for just as arrogance distances one from Allah's (awj) proximity, so does it blind the heart,

thereby preventing it from comprehending the Qur`an.

2. The exoteric prerequisites for understanding the Qur`an are as follows:

- a. One must have a thorough knowledge of the 'Arabic language: both its vocabulary and grammar. These can be attained through the disciplines of morphology, syntax, rhetoric, style and vocabulary.
- b. One must have an in-depth knowledge of Islamic history and the circumstances surrounding the revelation of the verses. He must know the Qur`anic sciences. For example, he must know the general verses and the specific ones; the unqualified verses and the qualified; the verses that abrogate and those that are abrogated.
- c. He must seek protection from Allah (awj) from the cunning of Satan and from the trickery of his own lower soul.

Saying:

أَعُوذُ بِاللَّهِ مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيمِ

Audhu billahi min ash-shaitanir rajeem

I seek refuge from Satan, the cursed one

- d. He should start by saying the *bismillah*.
- e. He should know all the verses that are in any way related to the verse in question as well as all the narrations that speak to the verse. The latter is especially important because the verses of the Qur`an have deeper, hidden meanings that no one other than the Infallibles can access.
- f. One must put aside all personal bias so that he can effectively comprehend what the Qur`an has to say. If he finds that the Qur`an contradicts his previous understanding, he must accept the Qur`an's teaching and abandon his prejudice. Otherwise, he will end up imposing his own view on the Qur`an (*al-tafsir bi al-ra'y*).
- g. One must look at the Qur`an from a metaphysical viewpoint so that he does not attribute physical traits to Allah (awj) nor liken him to his creation. To do this, he must interpret equivocal verses (*al-mutashabihat*) in light of unequivocal ones (*al-muhkamat*) and authentic traditions.
- h. One must also be aware of the needs of the day. He should be aware of scientific advancements and should keep a look out for the fulfilment of certain divine promises that are found in the Qur`an. In this way he will better be able to satisfy the needs of the younger generation. As Imam Ja'far b. Muhammad as-Sadiq (ع) says: "Allah has not sent this Qur`an for one age or another, not for one people or another.

Rather, it is perpetually fresh and attractive to all people.”¹³

However, one must be careful not to impose his own view on the Qur`an. The Prophet (ص) says, “Learn the Qur`an and recite it. It is a means of remembering Allah. It is both a provision for you and a burden. Thus, follow the Qur`an, and do not make it follow you. If the Qur`an leads someone, it leads him to Paradise. But if one leads the Qur`an, it shoves him into hellfire.”

i. One’s intention in reading and studying the Qur`an should not be limited to attaining the reward for reading it, nor to using the verses in speaking and writing. Instead of making the Qur`an an investment for this world, he should make it an investment for the afterlife. He should seek insight and understanding, and should seek to act according to its precepts. Allah (awj) forbid that his studies subject him to the punishment of the scholar who fails to act according to his knowledge.

j. When he reads verses concerning Allah’s (awj) mercy and his promises of Paradise, he should feel hopeful and should enjoin himself to obey Allah (awj) and to abandon sin. And when he reads verses containing threats of hellfire and descriptions of its punishment, he should frighten himself of sinning against Allah (awj). All this is to purify his heart and prepare the way to eternal felicity.

k. When he reads verses that describe the believers and those who fear Allah (awj) and do righteous deeds, and when he reads verses describing the disbelievers, the pagans, the beliers and the hypocrites, he should weigh himself against the scale of the Qur`an. He should take account of himself, and purify himself of all bad attributes and adorn himself with righteousness. As Allah (awj) has said, ***“I have only created Mankind and the Jinn to worship me.”***

Brief Answer

The Qur`an is the eternal miracle of the Prophet Muhammad (ص). It is a book that illuminates all things. Though it is composed of simple words and phrases, it is stated in a high literary style and conveys ideas that soar far beyond the comprehension of a normal human being. To perceive its essence and accurately derive laws from it, is immensely difficult. Thus, despite the fact that the Qur`an is “clear,” to properly understand it and act upon it takes great effort.

The prerequisites to understanding the Qur`an are of two kinds:

Exoteric: One must have a firm grasp on

- a. The ‘Arabic language with all its intricacies;
- b. The history of Islam;
- c. The circumstances that surrounded the revelation of the various verses;
- d. Narrations that are directly relevant to the exegesis of the Qur`an;

e. The general verses and the specific ones; the unqualified verses and the qualified; the verses that abrogate and those that are abrogated.

Esoteric

a. One must have the spiritual purity that comes from the fear of Allah (awj).

b. One must not be arrogant.

Detailed Answer

1. Surat al-Taghabun (64), Verse 8:

﴿ فَتَأْمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَالنُّورِ الَّذِي أَنْزَلْنَا ﴾

2. Surat Yasin (36), Verse 69:

﴿ إِنَّهُ هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكْرٌ وَقُرْآنٌ مُبِينٌ ﴾

3. Surat al-Nahl (16), Verse 89:

﴿ وَنَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ تِبْيَانًا لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ ﴾

4. Surat al-Nisa' (4), Verse 174:

﴿ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ قَدْ جَاءَكُمْ بُرْهَانٌ ﴾

5. Surat al-Dukhan (44), Verse 58:

﴿ فَأِنَّمَا يَسَّرْنَاهُ بِلِسَانِكَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴾

6. Surat Muhammad (47), Verse 24:

﴿ أَفَلَا يَتَذَكَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ أَمْ عَلَى قُلُوبٍ أَقْفَالُهَا ﴾

7. Surat al-Nur (24), Verse 35:

﴿ اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ﴾

8. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 133:

كِتَابُ اللَّهِ يُبَصِّرُونَ بِهِ، وَتَنْطِقُونَ بِهِ، وَتَسْمَعُونَ بِهِ وَيَنْطِقُ بَعْضُهُ بِبَعْضٍ، وَيَشْهَدُ بَعْضُهُ عَلَى بَعْضٍ

9. Surat al-Waqi'ah (56), Verses 75-80:

﴿ فَلَا أُقْسِمُ بِمَوَاقِعِ النُّجُومِ. وَإِنَّهُ لَقَسَمٌ لَوْ تَعْلَمُونَ عَظِيمٌ. إِنَّهُ لَقُرْآنٌ كَرِيمٌ فِي كِتَابٍ مَكْنُونٍ. لَا يَمَسُّهُ إِلَّا الْمُطَهَّرُونَ. تَنْزِيلٌ مِنْ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴾

10. Surat al-Ahzab (33), Verse 33:

﴿ إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا ﴾

11. Surat al-Nisa' (4), Verse 59:

﴿ ... يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولِي الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ ﴾

12. al-Ghadir, vol. 1, pg. 176:

...أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ، إِنِّي تَارِكٌ فِيكُمْ الثَّقَلَيْنِ كِتَابُ اللَّهِ وَعِترتي أَهْلَ بَيْتِي...إِنَّهُمَا لَنْ يَفْتَرِقَا حَتَّى يَرِدَا عَلَيَّ الْحَوْضَ

13. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 89, pg. 15:

عَنِ الرِّضَا عَنْ أَبِيهِ أَنَّ رَجُلًا سَأَلَ أَبَا عَبْدِ اللَّهِ (ع): مَا بَالُ الْقُرْآنِ لَا يَزِدَادُ عَلَى النَّشْرِ وَالدَّرْسِ إِلَّا غَضَاضَةً؟ فَقَالَ: لِأَنَّ اللَّهَ تَبَارَكَ وَتَعَالَى لَمْ يَجْعَلْهُ لِزَمَانٍ دُونَ زَمَانٍ، وَلَا لِنَاسٍ دُونَ نَاسٍ، فَهُوَ فِي كُلِّ زَمَانٍ جَدِيدٌ، وَعِنْدَ كُلِّ قَوْمٍ غَضٌّ إِلَى يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ

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