

With the Name of Allah, All-Merciful, Most Merciful

PRINCIPLES OF UNDERSTANDING THE QUR'AN

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INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an stands as a constitution for the entire Muslim Ummah. The Arabs, immediate recipients of this marvellous Book, a nation unknown and sandwiched between the two mighty empires, Roman and Persian, of the seventh century CE, provided a basis for an outstanding culture, global civilisation and universal religion. How did this miracle happen? Without doubt, it happened because of the message of the Qur'an.

This Book is a treasure and demands efforts on the part of the one seeking this treasure. Imagine a person who owns a piece of land that is full of hidden gold but due to his sheer ignorance, he limits his efforts to growing vegetables upon that land. Or imagine a drought-stricken person who is about to die of thirst although there is a well of sweet, cold water behind the rock against which he sits. In both cases, it is not the land or the well that is to be blamed, but rather the person who has fallen prey to his lack of knowledge and understanding.

The glorious period of Muslim rule, from the time of the Prophet (SAWS) himself until the end of the Ottoman empire, owes its greatness, might and popularity to the true understanding of the concepts of Jihad, enjoining the goodness and forbidding the evil, the equality of mankind and other such magnificent Qur'anic teachings. Similarly, the shortcomings, faults and mistakes of Muslim history after the Golden Age of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs originated from their misconceptions, misinterpretations and lack of adherence to the teachings of the Qur'an, and these are also the very reasons for the present state of humiliation of the Muslims. Add to this the sad phenomenon of factionalism in Islam, itself based on wrong interpretations of the Qur'anic maxims.

When 'Ali b. Abi Talib, fourth Caliph of Islam, and Mu'awiyah, Governor of Syria, were about to reconcile their differences through arbitration, a group of dissenters rejected both parties by raising the Qur'anic slogan, "Judgment is only for Allah." To this, 'Ali responded, "A word of truth, used to support falsehood." Thus a wrong interpretation of a Qur'anic verse led to the establishment of an independent faction that later engaged in constant fighting with 'Ali and subsequent rulers.

In the one hundred and fourteen surahs of the Qur'an, a variety of subjects is seen, such as the emphasis on beliefs (the Oneness of God, importance of Messengerhood, the Hereafter, etc.), tales of the ancient nations and their response to the Prophets of Allah, admonition that amends human ethical codes and sets of legal rulings that cover the whole life of the believers. The latter aspect, i.e. the rulings of the Qur'an, can be classified according to the following three categories:

A. Maxims of a general nature that govern many aspects of life, for example:

a.

"He has not placed any difficulty upon you in the religion."

b.

“Allah wishes ease for you; He does not wish hardship upon you.”

c.

“In retaliation, there is Life for you, O people of understanding.”

d.

“... except that to which you are forced.”

e.

“Their matters are agreed by consultation amongst themselves.”

B. Rulings of a fundamental and general nature, that require explanation of the specifics, e.g. the commandments about establishing Prayer, giving Zakat, performing the Hajj, etc.

C. Rulings explained in specific detail such as those related to divorce, distribution of inheritance, prohibited marital relations, etc.

It is a great pity that some people have rendered this Magnificent Book, with all its amazing content, into a manual of ‘Amaliyyat (spiritual healings) only.

With these few words as an introduction, we now turn to the principles of understanding and explaining the Qur’an.

1. THE QUR'AN EXPLAINED BY THE QUR'AN ITSELF

The reader of the Qur'an will note very easily that some verses of the Book are explained exhaustively at a different place in the Qur'an. Our Shaykh in Tafsir, Muhammad al-Amin al-Shanqiti has followed this principle predominantly in his famous nine-volume Tafsir known as *Adwa' al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an bi l-Qur'an*. For example:

A. The last verse of Surat al-Fatihah,

“The path of those whom You have favoured; not of those who received Wrath, nor of those who go astray.” (Q. 1:7) The explanation of these three groups of people, i.e. the favoured ones, those who received the Wrath of Allah and those who have gone astray, is given in the following verses:

a.

Whoever obeys Allah and the Messenger, they will be with those whom Allah has favoured, from amongst the Prophets, the Truthful Ones, the Witnesses and the Righteous: a beautiful fellowship they are! (Surah al-Nisa', 4:69)

b.

Humiliation and Poverty were stamped upon them, and they returned with Wrath from Allah. This was because they used to deny the Signs of Allah and kill the Prophets unjustly; this was because they disobeyed, and used to transgress. (Surah al-Baqarah, 2:61)

c.

Say: O People of the Book! Do not go to extremes in your religion, away from the Truth. Do not follow the desires of people who have strayed before, misguided others greatly and strayed from the Straight Path. (Surah al-Ma'idah, 5:77)

B.

“Worship your Lord until the Certainty (*al-Yaqîn*) comes to you.” (Surah al-Hijr, 15:99) A mistaken understanding of this verse led some ascetics to believe that worshipping Allah comes to an end when the person acquires the

quality of certainty. However, the following verses of Surah al-Muddaththir, taken with their context, make it very clear that *al-Yaqîn* means Death:

What landed you in the Burning? They said, “We were never going to be amongst those who Prayed, and we were never going to feed the poor; we used to delve (idly into useless matters) with those who delved; we used to belie the Day of Judgment: until the Certainty came to us!” (74:42-47)

C.

“Those who have Faith and do not mix their Faith with Injustice, they will have Security, and they are Guided.” (Surah al-An’am, 6:82) The Companions of the Prophet (SAWS) were very disturbed, knowing that no-one can totally avoid committing injustice (*zulm*) in his life and thus they thought that no-one can have Security and Guidance according to this verse. They came to the Prophet (SAWS) asking about this matter, upon which he quoted to them the verse of Surah Luqman (31:13), “Truly, associating partners (with Allah) is a Great Injustice.” He thus clarified to them that the Injustice (*Zulm*) mentioned in the verse of Surah al-An’am meant *Shirk* (Associating Partners with Allah) and not ordinary injustice and wrongdoing.

2. THE TEXT AND THE CONTEXT

Any statement taken out of context can be construed to have a meaning not intended by the author of the statement, and the same applies to the Qur'an. For example, the Sunnah is indisputably the second source of Shari'ah (Islamic Law), after the Qur'an. However, this basic fact is denied by some people who will go to any lengths to try to support their position by means of the Qur'an. They will quote the verse of Surah al-'Ankabut (29:51),

“Does it not suffice them that we have sent down the Book, that is recited to them? Truly, in this there is Mercy and a Reminder for a Believing People.” However, does this verse speak of the Qur'an as being the only source of Shari'ah? The context reveals the true meaning of the verse, for the verse before it says,

“They said: Why are Signs not sent down to him from his Lord? Say: the Signs are only with Allah, and I am only a clear warner.” Thus, the meaning is very clear. The non-believers asked for signs or miracles. The answer is that these are in the hands of Allah, while the duty of the Prophet of Allah is only to warn the people of the consequences of their false beliefs and misconceptions. However, if they are looking for signs, is not the Book of Allah a great enough sign for them to recognise Allah and have faith in him?

3. MUTAWATIR HADITH & THE CONTINUOUS PRACTICE OF THE MUSLIM UMMAH

Many of the Islamic rituals of worship such as the five daily prayers (Salah), their timings, the call to prayer (Adhan), the poor-due (Zakah), etc. have been practised by the Muslims in a certain way throughout the ages.

This continuous uninterrupted practice (Ta'amul) of the Muslim Ummah stands by itself as a great evidence behind the specifics that are performed. Any explanation of these terms mentioned in the Qur'an contrary to the practice of the Ummah will be rejected outright. Similarly, the fundamental beliefs of Islam including the finality of Prophethood are backed by the consensus and practice of the Ummah throughout history since the advent of the Prophet's mission.

4. AUTHENTIC AHADITH

Authentic ahadith, whether *ahad* (with only a few reporters) or *mashhur* (with numerous independent chains of reporters) are a reference for tafsir, since Hadith is a major source of the Shari'ah, as well as of the understanding of the Qur'an, for the task of explaining the Qur'an was entrusted by Allah to the Prophet (SAWS). Allah Almighty said,

“We sent down to you the Message, that you may explain to the people what was sent down to them.” (Surah al-Nahl, 16:44) The Prophet's explanation of the Qur'an, that reaches us via the authentic transmissions of Hadith, is rightly considered to be a form of revelation by Allah Himself. The Qur'an is declared as a direct form of revelation whilst the authentic Hadith and Sunnah embodies indirect revelation. Logically, the right of explaining the Qur'an belongs first and foremost to the one who received it from Allah, either directly or through the archangel Jibril.

For example, Allah Almighty said,

“Allah has permitted trade but prohibited usury (*riba*).” (Surah al-Baqarah, 2:275) In numerous ahadith, the Prophet (SAWS) has explained the two types of usury known as *Riba al-Nasi'ah* (commonly known as interest) and *Riba al-Fadl* (the exchange of gold, silver and certain foodstuffs for their like with a variation in weight). To legally permit commercial interest, or to explain Riba differently with the heinous motive of legalising it, would certainly contradict the definition of Riba given by the Prophet (SAWS) himself. An example of such a definition that excludes commercial interest from Riba without any evidence is that of Abdullah Yusuf Ali in his commentary on the above-mentioned verse, “The definition I would accept would be: undue profit made, not in the way of legitimate trade, out of loans of gold and silver, and necessary

articles of food such as wheat, barley, dates and salt (according to the list mentioned by the Prophet himself). My definition would include profiteering of all kinds, but exclude economic credit, the creature of modern banking and finance.” (The Holy Qur’an: Translation and Commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, IPCI 1999, p. 128, footnote no. 324)

Another example of the Prophet’s explanation is the verse,

“Those who hoard gold and silver, and spend it not in the way of Allah, give them glad tidings of a painful punishment!” (Surah al-Tawbah, 9:34) Since the hoarding of gold and silver had been a common practice amongst the Companions, they were very disturbed when this verse was revealed, and expressed their anxiety to the Prophet, upon which he said, “If zakat has been paid out of such wealth, it is no longer a hoard.”

5. EXPLANATIONS GIVEN BY THE COMPANIONS OF THE PROPHET (SAWS)

In the absence of a recorded explanation given by the Prophet (SAWS), the explanation of a Companion about a verse is given priority to other explanations as long as the Companions do not differ about its meaning. For example:

a.

“Amongst the people is he who buys idle talk to misguide from the way of Allah without knowledge.” (Surah Luqman, 31:6) Ibn Mas’ud said about idle talk, “It is Singing.”¹

b.

“Whoever turns away from My Remembrance, truly he will have a constricted life.” (Surah Ta Ha, 20:124) Abu Hurayrah said, “The constricted life is the torture in the grave.”

c.

“Safeguard the Prayers, especially the Middle Prayer.” (Surah al-Baqarah, 2:238) ‘Aishah, Mother of the Believers, said, “The Middle Prayer is the ‘Asr (Late Afternoon) Prayer.”

¹ Given the full text of the Qur’anic ayah, this explanation would refer to singing that “misguides people from the way of Allah,” and not to all singing. – U.H.

6. KNOWLEDGE OF THE ARABIC LANGUAGE

Language is a vessel used to convey a particular meaning. Undoubtedly, translation can help in understanding the Qur'an. However, lack of a deep knowledge of the Arabic language may result in misinterpretation of the Qur'an. For example:

- A. Disbelief in the Divine miracles has led some non-Arab scholars to misinterpret the meanings of the Qur'an to suit their prejudices. As an illustration, the miracle of twelve springs of water gushing from a rock is narrated in the Qur'an thus, "And (remember) when Musa asked for his people to be watered, so We replied, 'Strike the rock with your staff!' Then twelve springs gushed forth from it." (Surah al-Baqarah, 2:60) One scholar, in his Tafsir, interpreted the word *daraba* ("to strike") to mean "travelling in the land," *'asa* ("staff") to mean "community" and *hajar* ("rock") to mean "mountain." Thus he rendered the meaning as, "Take your community to the mountain." This interpretation is unacceptable from the point of view of the Arabic language. The verb *daraba* always means "to hit, to strike" unless it is followed by the particle *fi*, in which case it means to travel, e.g. Surah al-Nisa' 4:101 and Surah al-Muzzammil 73:20. The noun *'asa* means "a staff, a stick" unless it appears in a context such as *shaqqa 'asa l-qawm* ("he split the community"). Similarly, *hajar* means "a stone, a rock" whereas other words such as *jabal* are used for a mountain. Thus, the meaning of the verse in question has been distorted due to a sheer ignorance of the Arabic lexicon.
- B. In this example, a single letter causes a change in the meaning that is missed by translation. Compare the descriptions of the inhabitants of Hell and Paradise as given in Surah al-Zumar 39:71-73, translation by Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali: "The Unbelievers will be led to Hell in crowds. Until, when they arrive there, its gates will be opened ... And those who feared their Lord will be led to the Garden in crowds. Until, behold, they arrive there; its gates will be opened." There is no significant difference between the two descriptions in translation. However, in the Arabic text, a *waw al-hal* (*waw* of adverbial conjunction) occurs in the latter description. This single letter makes the following differentiation between the descriptions: the gates of Hell are not opened until the sinners arrive there, as a token of their humiliation and disgrace; on the other hand, the gates of Paradise have been opened before the Godfearing people arrive there as a token of respect and honour. Even in our world, criminals have to wait at the gates of a prison until permission is given to enter after proper checking has been carried out, while the gates of the royal palace are left wide open for a state guest.

7. EVENTS SURROUNDING REVELATION (ASBAB AL-NUZUL)

It is a general principle of tafsir that knowledge of the events which led to a particular revelation help in understanding the verses concerned, although any legal ruling involved is not necessarily confined to that particular situation.

For example, the verse allowing polygamy (Surah al-Nisa', 4:3) constitutes a general teaching for the believers, although the circumstances that led to this revelation were specific:

“If you fear that you will not deal justly among the orphans, then marry the women of your choice, two, three or four. But if you fear that you will not behave fairly, then (marry only) one.” Abdullah Yusuf Ali comments on this verse by saying, “It was after Uhud, when the Muslim community was left with many orphans and widows and some captives of war. Their treatment was to be governed by principles of the greatest humanity and equity. The occasion is past, but the principles remain. Marry the orphans if you are quite sure that you will in that way protect their interests and their property, with perfect justice to them and to your own dependants if you have any. If not, make other arrangements for the orphans.” (A.Y. Ali, p. 205, footnote no. 508)

Note similarly the background to Surah al-Baqarah, verse 189 regarding “entering houses from the back” and verse 195, “Do not throw yourselves with your own hands towards destruction.”

8. APPROACHING THE QUR'AN WITHOUT BIAS OR PREJUDICE

For example, some people committed to rejection of the Hadith quote verses such as, “Amongst the people is he who purchases vain talk (*hadith*)” (Surah Luqman, 31:6) and “Then in which message (*hadith*), after it, will they believe?” (Surah al-Mursalat, 77:50) In both verses, the word *hadith* appears, carrying the meaning of “talk, tales” and “message” respectively. Clearly, it does not mean the Hadith of the Prophet (SAWS) at all. A perusal of the Qur'an brings to light the following further meanings of the word *hadith*:

- A. The Qur'an itself, “Allah has revealed the Best of Speech (*Hadith*), a Book, Self-Similar, Oft-Repeated.” (Surah al-Zumar, 39:23).
- B. A saying of the Prophet (SAWS), “And (remember) when the Prophet disclosed a matter (*hadith*) in confidence to one of his wives ...” (Surah al-Tahrim, 66:3)
- C. Conversation of the Companions, “... nor staying for conversation (*hadith*)” (Surah al-Ahzab, 33:53)
- D. Gossip and vain talk of the idolators, as quoted above (31:6).

Thus, it would be a great injustice to the Qur'an if a particular word has been taken out of its context to suit one's own prejudice.

9. KNOWLEDGE OF ABROGATING AND ABROGATED VERSES

In his *Al-Itqan*, Suyuti has given twenty-one verses that have been abrogated by later ones. According to Shah Waliullah of Delhi, most of these can easily be understood as related to a process of gradation observed in establishing certain commandments, e.g. different stages involved in the prohibition of drinking wine, and the verses related to peace and war: initially, the Muslims were told to exercise patience and constraint but they were later allowed to fight against injustice when they had the physical power to do so. In his treatise, *Al-Fawz al-Kabir*, Shah Waliullah states that the following five verses are definitely abrogated by later revelation:

- a) Surah al-Baqarah, verse 2:180, about making a will for parents and relatives. This ruling is abrogated by verse 4:11 of Surah al-Nisa' which defines the inheritance shares for parents and other close-relatives. This abrogation was also confirmed by the Prophet (SAWS) by his saying, "No bequest is allowed for an inheritor."
- b) Surah al-Baqarah, verse 2:240, about widows being allowed to stay in their former husbands' homes for one year. This is abrogated by verse 234 of the same surah (note that this is a later revelation, although it occurs earlier in the arrangement of the Qur'an) that restricts this period to four months and ten days.
- c) Surah al-Anfal, verse 8:65, which commands the believers to stand firm in the face of an enemy up to ten times their number. This is abrogated by the very next verse which allows them to retreat if the enemy is over twice their number.
- d) Surah al-Ahzab, verse 33:52, which prohibits the Prophet (SAWS) from marrying any more women. This is abrogated by verse 50 (again, a later revelation although earlier in the surah), which allows him to marry women under certain conditions. However, some commentators on the Qur'an do not agree with this view.
- e) Surah al-Mujadilah, verse 58:12, which commands the believers to offer charity before their private consultations with the Prophet (SAWS), a ruling that is explicitly abrogated by the very next verse.

10. KNOWLEDGE OF THE DIFFERENT WAYS IN WHICH THE QUR'AN IS EXPLAINED BY THE QUR'AN ITSELF

This is in a sense an elaboration of the first principle given. We would like to draw the attention of the reader to the preface of *Adwa' al-Bayan* by Shaykh Muhammad Amin al-Shanqiti. In this scholarly dissertation he has given around twenty-three different ways in which some verses of the Qur'an explain others. We will look more closely at just one of these striking sub-principles, "If a certain word has more than one meaning in the Qur'an but one of those meanings is predominant, it cannot be excluded from any verse." For example, the word *ghalaba* means to "conquer, overpower, dominate" by way of argument or military power, so in verse 58:21 of Surah al-Mujadilah,

"Allah has decreed, 'I shall conquer, I and My Messengers'," is the conquest by weight of argument alone or by physical power as well? The latter meaning is that which is predominant in the Qur'an, cf. the following verses:

a)

"Say to the unbelievers: you shall be overpowered ..." (Surah Al 'Imran, 3:12)

b)

"Whoever fights in the way of Allah, being killed or conquered ..." (Surah al-Nisa', 4:74)

c)

"If there are twenty of you, patient and persevering, they will conquer two hundred ... if there are a hundred of you, patient and persevering, they will conquer two hundred." (Surah al-Anfal, 8:65-66)

d)

"Alif Lam Mim. The Romans have been conquered, in the lowest part of the land, and after their conquest they will conquer, within a few years." (Surah al-Rum, 30:1-3)

The verse of Surah al-Nisa' is especially decisive. It speaks of either conquering or being killed, meaning that the fighter cannot be considered as dominant if he is killed by his enemy. But this may appear to contradict the sayings of Allah which state that some of the Prophets were killed,

“A group you belied, another group you kill ...” (Surah al-Baqarah, 2:87) and

“A group they belied, another group they kill.” (Surah al-Ma'idah, 5:70) To answer this, al-Shanqiti says that the Messengers promised dominance in the verse of Surah al-Mujadilah are those who are commanded to fight in the Way of Allah, cf. the verse of Surah al-Nisa'. They are the ones who cannot be conquered by others. However, the Messengers who were killed did not meet their deaths in battle, for no Prophet or Messenger died in battle; rather, they were murdered as non-combatants by their enemies.

In contrast to this view, Mawlana Amin Ahsan Islahi says in his *Tadabbur-e-Qur'an* that the promise of dominance as given in Surah al-Mujadilah is confined to the Messengers of Allah (*Rasul* pl. *Rusul*) and does not apply to the Prophets (*Nabi* pl. *Anbiya'*). In his view, the Messenger is of a higher status than the Prophet, and the Messengers are promised dominance whilst the Prophets are not. This is why the Qur'an speaks about the Children of Israel killing the Prophets, “they used to kill the Prophets unjustly.” (Surah al-Baqarah, 2:61) Hence, according to him, there is no need to differentiate between a Messenger who is commanded to fight and one who is not.

11. UNDERSTANDING SOME VERSES IN THE LIGHT OF MODERN DISCOVERIES

Allah Almighty is the originator of signs in the universe and signs in revelation. Therefore, the Qur'anic revelation can never be found contradictory to an established scientific fact, unlike scientific theories which may differ from time to time. The revelation was often understood in a simple way by the early Muslims, but different meanings can be attributed to them in the light of newly-established scientific facts. For example, Allah said,

“He has let loose the two bodies of water: they meet, with a barrier between them that they cannot transgress.” (Surah al-Rahman, 55:19) This verse has been explained as the freshwater of the river joining the saltwater of the sea in a very distinctive way. The phenomenon is also confirmed by verse 25:53 of Surah al-Furqan,

“He is the One who let loose the two bodies of water: this one is palatable and sweet while that one is salty and bitter. He has placed between them a partition and an unassailable barrier.” Now note this scientific discovery:

“Q. Which way does water flow in the Straits of Gibraltar?

A. It flows east and west. The surface flow carries Atlantic water eastward into the Mediterranean Sea, where it is subjected to strong evaporation. The water's salinity increases, making it denser. It then sinks and returns to the Atlantic Ocean by flowing westward along the bottom of the Straits.” (National Geographic, July 2002.)

Another striking example is that of the expansion of the universe. Allah says,

“The heaven: We have built it with Might, and We are expanding it.” (Surah al-Dharyat, 51:47) Dr. Haluk Nurbaki, a Turkish oncologist, gives a detailed interpretation of the phenomenon of the expansion of the universe, that we sum up with this quotation:

“This sacred verse, therefore, indicates this expansion as a basic law for creatures to exist and to occupy a certain position in space, with its decree: *We expand heaven wide*. How can the revelation of such a message of astrophysics fourteen centuries ago be explained in any way other than as a miraculous secret of the Koran?

Astrophysicists express this expansion today in terms of a distance of twenty billion light years. That is, the radius of the observable universe, with its concentric

bands of heavens, is twenty billion light years, or about 193×10^{21} kilometers. In recent years, radio telescopes have also provided evidence that this limit is expanding at nearly the speed of light.” (Verses from the Holy Koran and the Facts of Science, Indus Publishing Corporation, Karachi, 1992, p. 233)