

USUL UT-TAFSIR-THE PRINCIPLES OF HERMENEUTICS

It cannot be lost to anyone that it is important to understand revelation to know how to access the meanings of the revelation. Failure to do so will result in tampering with the text and making the Qur'an an enemy to one who does not understand it clearly with insight.

The word tafsir, derives from the word fassara, which entails the meaning of, 'explaining, elucidating, bringing out the meaning of something.' In a nutshell, this is hermeneutics,¹ 'how we understand and interpret texts of revelation in context and without distorting the meanings that the Revealer of Revelation, Allah, has given to us.' Distortion of revelation leads to Divine Judgement, as we have been told,

Those who pervert the truth in Our Signs are not hidden from Us. Is the one that will be thrown into the Fire better than or the one who will be safe on the Day of Resurrection?

[Surat ul-Fussilat, ayah 40]

And the unbelievers say, 'Why hasn't the Qur'an been sent down all at once?' We have sent it down stage by stage so that we strengthen your heart with it and We brought it with gradual recitation. And they will not bring you any saying but We shall bring you the truth and better understanding.

[Surat ul-Furqaan, ayaat 32-33]

The Prophet Muhammad saw proclaimed,

The Qur'an is either a proof for you or against you.²

By giving a careful contemplation to this text, we can easily come to an understanding that we need to access the text in how it was meant to be understood.

IMPORTANT POINTS BEFORE HEADING TO HERMENEUTICS

There is no approaching of falsehood from before it or from behind it. It is revelation sent down from the All Wise, the Praiseworthy.

[Surat ul-Fussilat, ayah 42]

We sent it down in truth and in truth did he descend. And we did not send you except as a giver of glad tidings and a warner. It is a Qur'an that we have sent down to you at intervals so that you might recite it to people at intervals, revealed in stages.

¹ Hermeneutics, in its' linguistic sense in the English language, is defined as,

...interpretation, especially of Scripture...

the Concise Oxford Dictionary, p. 467

² Collected in Sahih ul-Jaami` and classified as sahih.

[Surat ul-Israa', ayah 105-106]

The reason why we have had to quote these ayaat is that whatever we find in the Qur'an that may seem to be contradictory or opposite to what we understood, have to be looked at again. Due to the fact that the Qur'an is revelation, obviously there would be nothing wrong with it. Rather there must be other ayaat that lend to the meaning of the one that we understood, perhaps our understanding is at fault or maybe a hadith explaining the reason for the revelation of the ayah can better elucidate the meaning. Over all, enjoy the Words of Allah, reading and studying it, rather than mouthing it.

The point of Hermeneutics is not so much looking for proof-texts (verses to argue with and win over an opponent), but examining and understanding the texts in their context.

THE FIRST TWO TYPES OF AYAAT

In the beginning of our series of lectures, the first thing that we would like to speak about is the ayaat that are called muhkamaat and the ayaat that are called mutashaabihaat. These are mentioned by name in the Qur'an, where Allah SWT says,

It is He who sent down to you the Book, in which some verses have clear meaning, they are the substance of the Book, and others are those meanings of which there is doubt. Those in whose hearts is a disease perversely pursue doubtful ones, desiring deviation and searching for their own point of view of it, and its meaning is known only to Allah.

[Surah Aali `Imraan, ayah 7]

The ayah previously gives us a striking example of these two types of ayaat. Now we would like to understand their significance in somewhat more detail.

DECISIVE OR CLEAR PASSAGES (MUHKAMAAT)

Al-Qaadi Abu Ya`laa ³ RH states the following:

The Muhkam is the explained ayah...because Allah named the muhkamaat the substance of the Book and the substance of the thing is the foundation which nothing is given preference to other than it. So if is necessary to know that the Muhkam is not in need of something else for explanation, but it is the foundation in itself and it is not other than what we have mentioned. ⁴

The following ayaat would fall under this classification,

³ 458 AH/1066 AD. A major Hanbali scholar, absolute mujtahid inside of his school, a contemporary of Shaikh ul-Islam `Abdul Qaadir al-Jilaani al-Hanbali RH and one of the trainers of Shaikh ul-Islam Ibn ul-Jawzi RH. He wrote numerous works in the science of foundations, hermeneutics and the others. His title, al-Qaadi, the Judge, was bestowed on him due to his mastery of fiqh as well as tafsir and the disciplines of the Qur'an. His mastery over fiqh was revolutionary and his 50 volume set written on the functions of the Islamic domain is legendary.

⁴ Rawdat un-Naazir wa Junnat ul-Munaazir, V. 1, p. 213

O believers! Khamr⁵, gambling, idols and divining arrows are only unclean things, a work of Shaitan, so abstain and avoid it so that you will be successful.

[Surat ul-Maa'idah, ayah 90]

You are forbidden to eat the dead meat, blood, the flesh of swine and that on which any name has been invoked other than Allah at the time of slaughtering and that which dies by strangling and that which is beaten to death, that which died of a fall, that which is gored to death and what has been eaten by wild animals...

[Surat ul-Maa'idah, ayah 3]

It can be seen from these that the import of these ayaat is clear, although perhaps certain parts of the passage may need clarification. Nonetheless, this is a clear and decisive ayah regarding food and eating habits.

ALLEGORICAL PASSAGES (MUTASHAABIHAAT)

Shaikh ul-Islam Muwaffaq ud-Din Ibn Qudaamah RH states that the Mutashaabihaat ayaat have the following meanings:

Shaikh ul-Islam Ibn `Aqil RH⁶ mentioned,

The mutashaabih are those types of ayaat which have meanings that are not known to others besides the `ulama who know how to investigate them, for example the ayaat that on the surface seem to contradict each other. An example is His statement,

This is a Day when they shall not be able to speak.

[Surat ul-Mursalaat, ayah 35]

And Allah says in another place,

Woe be to us! Who has resurrected us from our place of rest?

[Surah Yaa Sin, ayah 52]

And there are other passages like this one.

Others also state, that the mutashaabih are the disjointed letters that appear at the beginning of those surahs that have them and the other things are not.

It is also mentioned that the muhkamaat are the promises and the threats, the haraam and the halaal and that mutashaabih are the stories of the past nations.

⁵ We have kept the word Khamr in the text, as it signifies anything that covers or fogs the senses or numbs the mind according to the statement of Sayyiduna Ibn `Abbas RAA in his own tafsir, Tanwir ul-Maqbaas, p. 131 under the same ayah.

⁶ 513 AH/1119 AD. One of the great Hanbali authorities of his age and a master in theology and hermeneutics, having written three books on the subject as well as a 200 volume digest on fiqh.

And the truth and the most preponderant view is that the mutashaabih are the ayaat that speak of the Attributes of Allah, mighty and Majestic.⁷

An example of answering and using allegorical passages, in which there is difficulty in discerning their meaning, is a question that was brought to Ibn `Abbas RAA which he answered effectively. We will use that for the purpose of our lecture for its' benefit is priceless.

A man came to Ibn `Abbas RAA and said, *'O Ibn `Abbas! I find things in the Qur'an that differ and contradict with me and something has come into my heart.'* Ibn `Abbas RAA said, *'Have you rejected or belied the verses?'* The man said, *'It is not rejection, but contradiction in myself.'*

Ibn `Abbas RAA said, *'Tell me what is troubling you.'* The man then began by saying, *'Listen to what Allah said, '*

...there shall be no relationships among them, nor will they ask after one another.

[Surat ul-Mu'minun, ayah 101]

'And Allah has also said,'

And they will face one another, asking questions.

[Surat ut-Tur, ayah 25]

'And Allah said in another ayah,'

...And they will not be able to conceal anything from Allah.

[Surat un-Nisaa', ayah 42]

'He said at another point,'

Then there has not remained any fabrication for them but to say, 'By Allah, our Lord, We were not idol worshippers.'

[Surat ul-An'aam, ayah 23]

'So they have already concealed something from Him in this ayah and look at the words,'

He has raised high its' vault and made it perfect. And He has made its' night dark and its sunshine bright. And after that He spread out the Earth.

[Surat un-Naazi'aat, ayaat 28-30]

'Now Allah has mentioned in this ayah the creation of the sky before the Earth, then He said in another ayah,'

⁷ Rawdat un-Naazir wa Junnat ul-Munaazir, V. 1, pgs. 213-215

Say, 'Do you disbelieve in Him who made the Earth in two days? And do you set up equals to Him? That is the Lord of all Creation. And He placed therein anchors of mountains rising above it and put blessings therein and ordained therein provisions for its' inhabitants. All of this in four days complete, this is for the enquirers. Then He turned towards the sky when it was smoke, then He said to it and the Earth, 'Both of you are to come willingly or unwillingly.' They said, 'We come willingly.' Then he completed them as seven skies in two days and He sent to each heaven the commands of its' own function.

[Surah Fussilat (Ha Mim Sajdah), ayaat 9-12]

'Here in this ayah, He mentioned the creation of the Earth before the sky. Then He says,'

And Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.

[Surat un-Nisaa', ayah 96; Surat un-Nisaa', ayah 100]

And Allah is Dominant, Wise.

[Surat un-Nisaa', ayaat 158 & 165]

And Allah is Hearing and Seeing.

[Surat un-Nisaa', ayah 134]

'So was He this way once, or has He always been so?' Ibn `Abbas^{RAA} said, 'What would you like me to do?' The questioner (the man) then said, 'Please inform me of their meaning, so that I can accept it and be at peace.'

Ibn `Abbas^{RAA} then began to answer the question,

'As far as this ayah,

...there shall be no relationships among them, nor will they ask after one another,

[Surat ul-Mu`minun, ayah 101]

'this is in reference to the first blowing of the Horn,'

And the Horn will be blown and all who are in the skies and the Earth will swoon, except whom Allah wills

[Surat uz-Zumar, ayah 68]

'So when this happens...there shall be no relationships among them, nor will they ask after one another, then when the Horn is blown again, they will stand,

And they will face one another, asking questions.

[Surat ut-Tur, ayah 25]

'In looking at the statement,

'...By Allah, our Lord, We were not idol worshippers.'

[Surat ul-An`aam, ayah 23]

'as well as the other one,

...And they will not be able to conceal anything from Allah.

[Surat un-Nisaa', ayah 42]

'This refers to the fact that on the Day of Resurrection, Allah will forgive the People of Sincerity of their sins and He will not harm them regarding the sin and He does not forgive shirk. When the idol worshippers see that, they will say to one another, our Lord forgives sins but does not forgive shirk. Come, let us say that we are people of sins but not idol worshippers.

As far as when they try to conceal, then a seal will be put on their mouths, then,

Today We shall set a seal on their mouths and their hands will speak to Us and their feet will bear witness of what they used to do.

[Surah Yaa Sin, ayah 65]

[This is the second part of the events of the Day of Resurrection and that this ayah is the first in the series:

On the day that their tongues, hands and feet will bear witness against them as to what they used to do

[Surat un-Nur, ayah 24]

'And once that happens, then the idol worshippers will know that nothing is concealed in the sight of Allah! And due to this, Allah says of them,'

On that day, those who disbelieved and disobeyed the Messenger will wish that the Earth would be levelled after burying them in it. And they will not be able to conceal anything from Allah.

[Surat un-Nisaa', ayah 42]

'As far as the statement,

He has raised high its' vault and made it perfect. And He has made its' night dark and its sunshine bright. And after that He spread out the Earth.

[Surat un-Naazi`aat, ayaat 28-30]

'Then it should be known that the creation of the Earth was in two days before the creation of the sky, then he turned towards the sky and formed them in two other days. Then He looked to the Earth, then made it spread out and egg-shaped and the water and pastures grew from it, in addition to the fact of making cracks in it where rivers flow. There were also the valleys, mountains, hills, sand and dirt, all of which were made in the last two days.

'So due to that, the Exalted One says,

He has raised high its' vault and made it perfect. And He has made its' night dark and its sunshine bright. And after that He spread out the Earth.

[Surat un-Naazi'aat, ayaat 28-30]

'As well as His Words,

Say, 'Do you disbelieve in Him who made the Earth in two days? And do you set up equals to Him? That is the Lord of all Creation. And He placed therein anchors of mountains rising above it and put blessings therein and ordained therein provisions for its' inhabitants. All of this in four days complete, this is for the enquirers.

[Surah Fussilat (Ha Mim Sajdah), ayaat 9-11]

'Then we look at the next ayaat,'

And Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.

[Surat un-Nisaa', ayah 96; Surat un-Nisaa', ayah 100]

And Allah is Dominant, Wise.

[Surat un-Nisaa', ayaat 158 & 165]

And Allah is Hearing and Seeing.

[Surat un-Nisaa', ayah 134]

'Indeed Allah affirms Himself with that and has named Himself with that. And He does not impute or ascribe that to anyone else, But Allah using the verb kaana is stating that He is azali (Pre-Eternal) as well.'

After all of this, Ibn `Abbas RAA then said,

*'Remember what I have said you and you should know that whatever appears contradictory to you from the Qur'an like what I have related to you, then indeed Allah did not abandon anything except thing of what He intended to be revealed, but people sometimes just don't know. So do not let yourself hold contradictions about the Qur'an, for indeed it is from Allah, the Mighty and the Majestic.'*⁸

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⁸ This passage is taken from the book, al-Faqih wal-Mutafaqqih, V. 1, pgs. 55-61