

PITFALLS IN HERMENEUTICS

SESSION #1

In the five lectures that we have done together, numerous benefits have been given to us by Allah. We praise Him as He has made it possible for us to complete this series and to gain a better understanding of His Revelation. Our next endeavour is to now show some of the discrepancies as well as deviations that can occur when not basing ourselves in sound principles of hermeneutics. These aberrations have taken place throughout history and have been documented by the Orthodox theologians for us to read and take heed of in this time.

With each error, insha'allah, we will understand how we can avoid these errors and how we can learn from them. We will try to take a look at each one and then give the response that the Orthodox gave to each issue proposed by those who would oppose the systematic theology of the Orthodox Muslims.

TAHRIF (ISOGESIS)

This is what is known as proof-texting. This is where someone, looking for texts that would support their doctrine, take things out of context and use them as proof for their evidence. This is done by taking small snippets of texts out of their contextual meaning and sometimes putting them with other equally unrelated texts and reading a meaning into it. This can also be called distortion.

EXAMPLES OF ISOGESIS OR DISTORTION

1. A Mr. Muhammad Jamil Zeeno, one of the major heads of the Salafi movement, was asked,

Who was the first of creation?

Answer: The first one created of the mankind was Adam and the first of the things is the pen.

Proof from the Qur'an:

Remember when your Lord said to the angels, 'Indeed I am going to create man from clay.'

[Surah Saad (38), ayah 71]

Proof from the Sunnah:

Indeed the first of what Allah created was the Pen.

[Related by Abu Dawud and at-Tirmidhi and classed as hasan] ¹

¹ What a Muslim Believes, p. 49, question #39

These passages are a clear example of isogesis, as two clearly unrelated passages are taken out of context and used in an incorrect manner. Let us observe them.

The first one in bodily form was the Prophet Adam ^{AS}, but the first one created at all was the Prophet Muhammad ^{SAW}, who existed in his spiritual essence first before Adam. One can ascertain this by looking at the following passages.

And we took from the prophets their covenant, from you (Muhammad), from Nuh, Ibrahim, Musa and `Isa ibn Maryam.

[Surat ul-Ahzaab (33), ayah 7]

One will notice that these five prophets are all in chronological order except for the Prophet Muhammad ^{SAW}. The Messenger of Allah ^{SAW} said about this passage,

I am the first of the prophets created and the last one sent.

Cross reference this with the following passage,

And when Allah took from the prophets the covenant, stating, ‘Take whatever I give you of the Book and the Wisdom and after that there will come to you a messenger confirming what is with you.

[Surah Aali `Imraan (3), ayah 81]

Notice that Allah mentioned all of the prophets together. In the same passage they also hailed the primordial prophet. In order for all of them to have hailed him, it would have necessary for them to have been together. And when their covenant was taken from them, the Prophet Muhammad ^{SAW} must have already been there for Allah would not ask anyone to hail or bear witness to something that did not exist.

The Messenger of Allah ^{SAW} stated,

I was written as the Seal of the Prophets and Adam was still kneaded in his clay.

[al-Haakim in his al-Mustadrak, V. 2, p. 418 who declared it sahih and adh-Dhahabi agreed; Ibn Hibbaan in his sahih, V. 14, pp. 312-13 and 315, hadith #6404; al-Haythami in Majma` az-Zawaa'id, V. 8, p. 223, Ibn Kathir in al-Bidaayah wan-Nihaayah, V. 2, p. 275; Ibn Taymiyyah in his Majmu`a Fataawa, V. 11, pp. 95-7, Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali in Lataa'if al-Ma`aarif, pp. 158-162]

Hopefully, this is ample proof to conclude the following,

1. The Prophet Muhammad ^{SAW} is the first prophet *created* and the last one *sent*.
2. *All* prophets were made to be under his banner and to hail him.
3. The Prophet Adam ^{AS} being created by Allah and coming to Earth is not connected with his being first.
4. There is no passage the explicitly notes him as the *first* prophet *created*.

5. Reading the passage in context will bring to light the fact that there is nothing implicitly indicating in this ayah that the Prophet Adam ^{AS} was the first man/prophet in existence. Such a conclusion has been inducted into the text after the conclusion was made in the mind of the isogete, which is a major error.

BAATINI (OVER-INTERPRETATION)

This has to do with when a text is taken to have a deeper meaning alone while disregarding its' outward meaning altogether. This is usually accomplished by over-spiritualising the meaning when it is not called for in the context of the passage. There are many examples of this mistake.

1. When speaking about the Ascension of the Prophet `Isa ^{AS}, Allah states,

Indeed Allah raised him to Himself

[Surat un-Nisaa' (4), ayah 158]

Mr. Mirza Tahir Ahmad, fourth successor to Ghulam Ahmad, founder of the Ahmadiyah movement, commented,

There is absolutely no reference in the verse to his physical ascension to heavens. It only says that God exalted him towards Himself which clearly signifies a spiritual exaltation, because no fixed abode can be assigned to God.

[The Holy Qur'an: Arabic Text with English Translation and Short Commentary, p. 227]

Mirza Tahir Ahmad further states about the Prophet `Isa ^{AS},

Now, as his followers have gone astray, it conclusively follows that Jesus is dead...

[The Holy Qur'an: Arabic Text with English Translation and Short Commentary, p. 267]

We will now cross reference this passage to others to examine the Baatini error that Mr. Ahmad has made. Allah says about the Prophet `Isa ^{AS},

And he is a sign of the Hour.

[Surat uz-Zukhruf (43), ayah 61]

Please notice that the text in its' verbal form is in the present tense, not past. Therefore, it is something that we are still awaiting. For if it was referring to the past, what sign of the Hour could the Prophet `Isa ^{AS} be if he is dead?

We can also compare the following text,

Muhammad is no more than a Messenger. Many messengers passed away before him. If he died or were slain, would you turn on your heels?

[Surah Aali `Imraan (3), ayah 144]

This text was revealed in regard to an incident in the Battle of Uhud, where the Prophet Muhammad SAW was injured and Shaitan called out to the believers that he had been killed. But he was not killed and was safe. ² The relevant part of the passage is what reads, *'many messengers passed away before him.'* You may easily notice that the passage is referring to the Prophet Muhammad SAW, who was alive in this world at the time and then stating that many Messengers passed away before him. Please keep in mind that he was *alive* in this world at the *time of the revelation* of this passage. The same is said of another prophet,

The Messiah son of Mary is no more than a Messenger. Many Messengers have passed away before him.

[Surat ul-Maa'idah (5), ayah 75]

Try to again notice that the passage is in the present tense, referring to the subject as *alive*. The presentation of words is the exact same in the passage, including the statement, *many Messengers have passed away before him*. Therefore, just as the Prophet Muhammad SAW was alive in the revelation of that ayah as it was revealed in the present tense, so is the Prophet `Isa AS alive at the revelation of this passage.

But how could we believe such a blatant distortion as to say that he is dead when the Orthodox have stated the fact of his Ascension and Second Advent down through history?

Sayyiduna Ibn `Abbas RAA says about the above passages,

He was raised to the sky.

[Tanwir ul-Maqbaas min Tafsir Ibn `Abbas, p. 111]

Imaam Ibn `Atiyyah al-Maaliki RH explains,

He was raised to His Sky and His Honour. `Isa is alive in the second sky according to what has been mentioned in the hadith of al-Israa...He will be resident there until the time comes for him to descend and kill the false Messiah. Thereafter, he will fill the Earth with justice and will reign for 40 years. Then he will die, just as human beings die.

[al-Muharrir al-Wajiz, pp. 497-98]

Imaam al-Baghawi RH stated,

² Please see Mawsu`at ut-Tafaasir, Zaad ul-Masir Fi `Ilm it-Tafsir, p. 227 for further details

He raised him to Himself in certainty.

[Ma`aalim ut-Tanzil, pp. 348-49]

Shaikh ul-Islam Ibn al-Jawzi ^{RH} comments,

They did not kill him, but Allah raised him to Himself

[Zaad al-Masir, pp. 341-42]

Shaikh ul-Islam al-`Izz ibn `Abdus-Salaam ^{RH} clarifies,

He was raised to the his sky or to a place where the judgements of other slaves do not fall upon him.

[Tafsir ul-Qur'an, pp. 120-21]

Perhaps we should also examine the Orthodox creeds,

Imaam Abu Hanifa ^{RH} (150 AH/767 AD) mentions in his work al-Fiqh ul-Akbar, the following issue,

And among the signs of the day of Resurrection is the appearance of Ya'juj and Ma'juj, the sun rising from the West and the descent of `Isa AS from the sky...

[al-Fiqh ul-Akbar, p. 8 all Arabic text]

Imaam Abu Ja`far at-Tahaawi ^{RH} (239 AH/853 AD) gives the creed of Muslim Orthodoxy in the following words:

And we believe in the signs of the Hour and from amongst them the appearance of the False Messiah and the descent of Isa` ibn Maryam AS from the sky.

`Aqidat ut-Tahaawiyah, p. 23, creedal point #100 all Arabic text.

Imaam Abu Bakr al-Aajuri ^{RH} (360 AH/971 AD) concludes:

Those who are fighting alongside `Isa AS are the Ummah of Muhammad SAW, while those who are fighting against `Isa are the Jews with the False Messiah. `Isa will kill the False Messiah and the Muslims will kill the Jews then `Isa AS will die and the Muslims will pray on him and he will be buried with the Prophet SAW and alongside Abu Bakr and `Umar RAA.

[Kitaab ush-Shari`a, p. 311]

Imaam Abu Hafs an-Nasafi ^{RH} explains:

And what the Prophet SAW reported from the signs of the hour is the appearance of the False Messiah, the Beast from the Earth, Ya'juj and Ma'juj and the descent of `Isa AS from the sky...

[`Aqaa'id an-Nasafi, p. 4 of the all Arabic text]

Imaam Muwaffaq ud-Din Ibn Qudaamah ^{RH} (620 AH/1223 AD) reports:

And from that are the Signs of the Hour, such as the appearance of the False Messiah and the Descent of `Isa AS, so he will kill him.

[Lum`at ul-`Itiqaad, p. 16 All Arabic text]

We should then know that the Prophet `Isa AS is indeed alive and will come at the Second Advent as has been prophesied in revelation.

2. Another example of the Baatini error would be where Allah SWT revealed,

And those who disbelieve and deny our signs, they are the companions of the Fire to dwell therein forever.

[Surat ul-Baqarah (2), ayah 40]

When speaking on the eternal nature of the Fire, Mirza Tahir Ahmad says,

Islam does not believe in the eternity of Hell, but regards it as a sort of penitentiary where sinners will be made to live for a limited period of spiritual treatment and cure.

[The Holy Qur`an: Arabic Text with English Translation and Short Commentary, p. 28]

It is interesting to note that nowhere in his commentary does Mr. Ahmad state the Paradise to be temporal and non-eternal. This perhaps has to do with the state of deviation and the fear that we as humans have of punishment. But in keeping with the subject, this man has made some very serious accusations. The only way we could try to answer them would be with unequivocal texts. Let us look at some of what Allah has said about the abiding punishment.

Those who deny Our Signs and treat them with arrogance, they are the companions of the Fire and they will dwell therein forever.

[Surat ul-A`raaf (7), ayah 36]

But in looking at these passages and others, someone could merely say that this means the same as that mentioned in Surat ul-Baqarah. It would appear like this on the outward, but perhaps the most clear and obvious evidence to quote would be,

They will desire that they exit from the Fire. And they will not exit from it. And they have an eternal punishment.

[Surat ul-Maa`idah (5), ayah 37]

For those that hold that the Fire is merely temporary, our questions to them should be the following,

- a. Why would people seek to exit from something that was not eternal?
- b. Why has Allah not allowed the people in this passage to leave the Fire if it will one day fizzle out?

c. Why did Allah emphasise the last part of the passage by saying that they will have an eternal punishment.

3. We have been given the good news about seeing our Lord in the Hereafter,

That day faces will be radiant, gazing at their Lord.

[Surat ul-Qiyaamah (75), ayaat 22-23]

But the famous Shi`a theologian, Ayatollah Muhammad Shiraazi claims,

To be able to see God is impossible as He is not a substance, nor will he ever be seen; not in this world and not in the Hereafter.

[Islamic Beliefs for all, p. 67]

This opinion is their dominant and relied upon position according to the famous Twelver Shi`a theologian, Allamah al-Hilli (1250-1325 AD) who stated,

The vision (or seeing) of God is impossible.

[Islamic Creeds: A Selection, pp. 98 & 100 under the chapter, God's Negative Attributes]

Indeed, the theology that these men proposed is very famous and has been popular from the beginning of time all the way to the Day of Judgement. Let us give them an example,

On the contrary, their hearts have a covering on them from what they used to earn. Indeed that day they will be veiled from their Lord.

[Surat ul-Mutaffifin (85), ayaat 14-15]

This is assuredly the punishment for those who reject faith and belief in Him. But here are some queries for someone who espouses this belief to ponder,

- a. If the unbelievers are veiled from their Lord, then what is the import of the verses previously quoted and others for the believers?
- b. If neither the believers nor the unbelievers is going to see the Lord, how are they different in the Hereafter?
- c. There are some 11 or more passages that mention explicitly and implicitly the fact of seeing Allah. If this is not their meaning, what are we to make of their meaning?

LAFZIYYAH (LITERALISM)

This error is indeed very egregious and has to do with taking texts that have a majaaz import and forcing them to bear on their literal import. This is indeed very dangerous. Incidents and mistakes such as this are common among the Salafi and Mu`tazilah cults. Here is a good example.

1. A visually impaired cultist was once debating with an Orthodox theologian. The cultist insisted that there is no majaaz in the Qur'an and that every ayah is haqiqah without any doubt. Upon giving numerous examples of what he thought was evidence, the cultist said that his position was iron clad and air tight. The Orthodox theologian asked the cultist if he was absolutely sure that there was no majaaz in the Qur'an in any case. The cultist replied in the affirmative. Upon receiving an affirmative answer, the Orthodox theologian replied to him with the following passages,

And whoever is blind in this life will be blind in the Hereafter and more astray than before.

[Surat ul-Israa' (17), ayah 72]

You cannot guide the blind out of their error.

[Surat un-Naml (27), ayah 81]

This debate promptly ended with the cultist utterly defeated.

2. Another fatal error in Lafziyyah can be seen in the exegesis that Mr. Muhammad Jamil Zeeno provided when asked,

Do the dead people hear the calls?

Answer:

The dead people do not hear the calls.

Proof from the Qur'an

Indeed you cannot make the dead to hear.³

[Surat un-Naml (27), ayah 80]

It would appear to the follower of lafziyyah that this is a literal passage, negating the ability of the dead to hear. Let us look at all of these passages in context,

³ What a Muslim Believes, p. 27, Question #17

Not alike are the blind and the seeing, nor the darkness or the light. Nor the shade and the heat. Nor are the living and the dead equal. Indeed Allah makes those whom He will to hear, but you cannot make those who are in their graves to hear.

[Surah Faatir (35), ayah 19-22]

It should then come to the notice of any reader that these ayaat are referring to a series of metaphors (majaaz), not the actual reality. What is taking place is the comparison of things and not the statement of fact.

Indeed, you cannot make the dead to hear, nor can you make the deaf to hear the call, when they show their backs and turn away. You cannot guide the blind out of their error. *You can only cause to hear those who believe in Our Signs and have submitted.*

[Surat ur-Rum (30), ayah 52-53]

We should notice that the hearing of the deaf is connected with those submitting to the revelation of Allah. Thus the deafness, blindness and deadness have to do with spiritual and metaphorical affairs, not the literal ones.

Indeed you cannot make the dead to hear nor can you make the deaf to hear the call, when they flee, turning their backs. You cannot guide the blind out of their error. *You can only cause to hear those who believe in Our Signs and have submitted.*

[Surat un-Naml (27), ayah 80]

The wording in this ayah is exactly identical to the one previously quoted. And with this, we hold the same position, that it is a metaphor and not intended on its' outward import. This can easily be found when cross-referencing the passages in context. And this is indeed the Orthodox position as passed down through the ages.

In finishing this section, we can see that deviation is just around the corner for those who would willingly lend the Devil a helping hand. What we must be sure to remember is that our faith has foundations and the revelation that explains our faith has clear rules that undergird it. To ignore these principles passed down from the first three generations to now is to place ourselves in peril, in fact a peril that could result in Divine Judgement. And may Allah preserve all of us from errors in understanding, interpreting and practising revelation.

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