

THE HOLY QUR'AN

القرآن الكريم

Objectives >>>

Students should:

- Be able to prove the authenticity of the Qur'an
- Know the differences between revelation of the Qur'an and Ḥadith
- Discuss the time and place of the revelation of the Qur'an
- Understand the history of the compilation of the Qur'an.
- Know the tools we have to understand the Qur'an:
- Be reminded of the importance of applying the Qur'an to ourselves and reading it with understanding
- Introduce the fact the Qur'an contains very specific and noble guidelines on social etiquette.
- Know that the Qur'an is the verbatim word of Allah
- Understand that the Holy Qur'an is the fundamental point of reference for Muslims
- Have a general understanding of the topics discussed in the Qur'an
- Understand that the Qur'an consists of clear and ambiguous āyāt, unconditional and limited āyāt, abrogated and abrogating āyāt
- Understand the harms of interpreting the Qur'an according to one's desire
- Be able to appreciate the importance of using the intellect with sincerity in obtaining the truth

FUNDAMENTALS OF ISLAM

LEVEL 5

Lesson 1: the Revelation and the Compilation of the Qur'an

As we have discussed in previous years, one of the fundamental beliefs of Muslims is the belief that the Holy Prophet (saw) was a messenger of Allah, the Almighty, and his message was made up of two primary gifts for mankind, the Holy Qur'an (the written message) and the holy Prophet and his pure Progeny (the practical message). The Holy Qur'an, as we have learnt in previous years, is like an instruction manual for operating the gifts that Allah has bestowed upon us (the body and the soul) so that we can fulfil our potential, whilst the Ahlul Bayt are the practical examples of those who reached their perfection by putting into practice the message of the Qur'an¹.

We discussed that the Qur'an contains the authentic words of Allah, the Wise, without addition or subtraction, without change or distortion. We discussed some of the proofs proving the authenticity of the Qur'an in great detail in previous years. Here, we will review some of these proofs briefly.

THE QUR'AN IS THE VERBATIM WORD OF ALLAH

The fundamental belief we have about the authenticity of the Qur'an is that it is the exact words of God. All Muslims are unanimous that the Qur'an is the verbatim Words of God. The Qur'an explicitly states:

"And verily, you (O Muḥammad) are given the Qur'an from the All-Wise, All-Knowing." [27:6]

There are many proofs of this such as:

1. **The Miracles of the Qur'an:** Had the Qur'an been the words of Prophet Muḥammad (saw) it would have been possible to forge similar to it. However, Allah (SWT) challenges all mankind to bring even a chapter

similar in its eloquence to the Qur'an, but no one in history has succeeded.ⁱⁱ

2. **Confirming the previous Scriptures yet correcting their perversions:** A big portion of the Qur'an deals with the stories of the previous Prophets. The Qur'an is free from all perversions which occurred in the Bible. The Qur'an clears the false accusations allegedly related to the Prophets.
3. **Its style:** The unique style of how different people are addressed in the Qur'an confirms that the Qur'an is the direct Word of God. It is not the indirect narration of the Words of God. For instance, more than 300 times God says to Prophet Muḥammad (saw): "Say (Qul)!"
4. The scientific miracles of the Qur'an, such as the description of the foetus in the mother's wombⁱⁱⁱ or the clear statement that the universe is expanding^{iv}.
5. The numerical miracles of the Qur'an^v.
6. The universality of the Qur'an: even though Prophet Muhammad (saw) lived in a small town in the middle of the Arabian Desert, the values taught in the Qur'an apply to all human society throughout all time. Values such as equity between races, rights of women and equality between social classes are all taught in the Qur'an, even though the Arabs were very much opposed to such values and hardly had any knowledge of them.

ḤADĪTH AL QUDSI AND PROPHETIC TRADITIONS

It is important to understand that according to the Muslims, revelation from God can be of three kinds^{vi} and that revelation can only come to Prophets.

The best description of God's revelation to man is explained in Sura Shu'arā':

وَمَا كَانَ لَيْشِيرَ أَنْ يُكَلِّمَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا وَحْيًا أَوْ مِنْ وَرَاءِ
حِجَابٍ أَوْ يُرْسِلَ رَسُولًا فَيُوحِي بِيَاذِنِهِ مَا يَشَاءُ ۚ إِنَّهُ
عَلِيُّ حَكِيمٌ

“And it is not for any mortal that Allah should speak to him except by revelation or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger and revealing by His permission what He pleases; surely He is High, Wise.” (42:51)

1. **Revelation without any intermediate:** This is the first type of revelation which is by 'casting to the heart' of the chosen person. The lowest degree of this revelation is called 'inspiration' (*al-ilhām*) which was given to the mother of Moses (28:7) and other believers who were not prophets. Inspiration also came to Prophet Muḥammad (saw) in the Night of Ascension (53:10). This form of communication from Allah is called **Hadith**: where only the meanings are from God, but the words are of Prophets. The narrations of the Prophet, including Ḥadīth al-Qudsi, and the inspiration that the infallible Imams and Sayyedah Fāṭimah received all fall into this category.
2. **Revelation through a physical obstacle:** In this type of revelation, Allah creates a voice from behind or above a physical object and communicates to His prophet in this way. This happened to Prophet Moses through a tree (28:30) or through fire (20:11).
3. **Revelation through an angel:** In this type the Almighty God creates the "Words" and delivers them to His chosen Prophet via an angel-messenger. In many of the instances the angel appears to the Prophet in a handsome human body and delivers the Message of God to him (11:81, 81:19). The example of this is the **Holy Qur'an**: Where the words and meanings both are revealed from God, and it is meant to be a miracle in itself and they are verbatim (precise words of Allah).

THE COMPILATION OF THE QUR'AN

Despite the evidence that indicates the authenticity of the Qur'an, over the centuries, many misconceptions have arisen in regards to the completeness or distortion of the Qur'an (*tahrif*) (a group of Ḥadīth in Sunni sources suggest the Qur'an is incomplete whilst some accuse the Shi'ah of believing in books other than the Holy Qur'an^{vii}). It is important therefore to understand how and when the Qur'an was revealed and compiled in order to clarify these misconceptions.

This divine Book is the actual word of God, revealed to Prophet Muḥammad (saw) over the last 23 years of his life. As we have learnt before, the Holy Qur'an is the collection of 114 chapters called Surah (meaning Section), which consists of 6205 'portions' called āyāt (which means 'Signs', indicating that each expression within the Qur'an is a sign of God).

The Holy Prophet (saw) had some secretaries known as the **Scribes of Revelation**, whose duty was to write down the āyāt which were revealed to the prophet, under his supervision. Therefore, the Holy Qur'an as it is at our hand today was compiled during the time of the Prophet (saw).

However, there is a general belief that the standard text of the Qur'an was adopted during the reign of 'Uthmān (644-56 AD). This general belief was introduced through some fabricated narrations^{viii}. Yet, there are many reasons rejecting this idea.

- 1- The Qur'an is called 'Book' in many āyāt of the Qur'an itself, which implies that it had already been compiled in a book form while it was still being revealed and the Prophet (saw) was alive.
- 2- The first Surah in the Qur'an is called, since the time of the Prophet, Surat al-Fātiḥa (the opening chapter). This surah was certainly not the first to be revealed to the Holy Prophet (saw), so why would be called al-Fātiḥa (the opening chapter) unless the Qur'an was already being compiled in the same sequence we have today.
- 3- In so many Ḥadith it is quoted from the Prophet that he ordered Imam 'Ali to compile all the skins and papers on which the scriptures were written, on one cloth and seal it.
- 4- And finally, Allah (SWT) in the Qur'an (ch.75:17) has promised that He is looking after the compilation of the Qur'an so that it will not follow the same destiny of the previous scriptures.

However, what was done during the reign of 'Uthmān was the uniting of the **accent** of recitation of the Qur'an according to the accent of the tribe of the Prophet, i.e. Quraysh. Also, what Imam 'Ali narrates regarding the compilation of the Qur'an after the Prophet's death, was the compilation of the Qur'an with the interpretation he had heard and read by the dictation of the Prophet.^{ix}

But as far as the actual compilation of the words, āyāt and surahs in the very sequence we have today, this was done during the life of the Prophet (saw), under his supervision, and by the orders of Allah (SWT).

HOMEWORK

1. **What is the difference between Ḥadith al Qudsi and the Holy Qur'an?**
2. **According to what you know, who was the first to compile the Qur'an in the form we have today, and give 2 proofs of your claim.**

Lesson 2: Understanding the Holy Qur'an



Now that we have acknowledged the authenticity of the Qur'an and are convinced of its completeness, we are confronted with another problem. How do we interpret the Qur'an? Can we understand the Qur'an? There are many sects in Islam, and the differences they have are often due to the different interpretations of the Holy Qur'an.

WHY DOES THE QUR'AN NEED INTERPRETATION?

On one level, the Holy Qur'an is easy to understand and is in fact aimed at the person who can speak average Arabic. Even such a person can understand the basic meanings of the āyāt of the Qur'an, learn its major principles (e.g. the unity of God, the Hereafter) and appreciate its eloquence.

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا الْقُرْآنَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِنْ مُدَكِّرٍ

“And certainly We have made the Qur'an easy for remembrance, but is there anyone who will mind?”
(54:17)

However, on another level, the Holy Qur'an needs a very analytical approach in order to be understood in the correct way. This is because some of its āyāt are ambiguous while others are allegorical (this will be discussed in the next lesson). Also, often the Qur'an only sets out general principle and leaves details and applications of the principles to the Sunnah of the Ahlul Bayt.

Therefore, sometimes, in order to understand the Qur'an in its correct sense, and especially to understand its deeper meanings, we need to refer to other sources of knowledge. These, in order of importance, are:

- 1- The holy Qur'an itself! -^x Allah (SWT) says in the Qur'an:

“(This is) a Book, whose verses are made decisive, then are they made plain, from the Wise, All-aware” (11:1)

Therefore one of the best ways of understanding some āyat of the Qur’an is to refer to other āyat which explain them. In order to be able to use this method, one must know

- a. The context of the verses and reason for revelation (*asbab un-nuzūl*)
- b. The timing of revelation (*makki* or *madani*)
- c. The language of the Qur’an (Arabic, knowledge of rhetoric, syntax, etymology- the meanings and origin of the words) and so on.

2- From the words of the Holy Prophet (saw) and the Ahlul Bayt (as)- (the ḥadīth): Allah (SWT) says in the Qur’an:

“He it is Who raised among the inhabitants of Mecca an Messenger from among themselves, who recites to them His communications and purifies them, and teaches them the Book and the Wisdom.” (Jumu’a 62:2)

Deeper interpretation of the Qur’an comes from narrations narrated from the Ahlul Bayt (as).

You may notice that interpreting the āyat of the Qur’an requires knowledge many sciences, including history, language, logic and often even the natural sciences.^{xi} It is also important to note that in order to understand the Qur’an, the Qur’an itself often refers us to our intellect, and asks us to use our intellect to understand the arguments that the Qur’an is putting forth to prove certain points. We will discuss the importance of the correct use of the intellect in the next lesson.

Applying the Message of the Qur’an

Now that we know that the Qur’an is the authentic verbatim word of God, and that it has reached us in its total complete form, let us look at some of the messages in the Qur’an that we are expected to apply in our daily lives. One of the fundamental contributions and miracles of the Qur’an, is that Allah, the Wise, has introduced through it principles of social ethics that are unmatched in any religion, faith, creed, government or society. It is important to remember also that it is very important to apply the teachings of the Qur’an to ourselves whenever we are reading it. Over the next two lessons, we will look at some of the social messages of the Qur’an to try to apply them in our life.

QUR’ANIC LESSON: THE BELIEVERS ARE BROTHERS

Allah, the Almighty, says in the holy Qur’an:

“The believers are but brethren, therefore make peace between your brethren and be careful of (your duty to) Allah that mercy may be had on you.” (49:10)

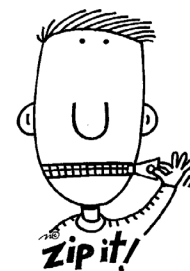
This is one of the most amazing verses of the Qur’an, and if today, we followed this injunction, there would be very little dispute between us. Imam al-Ṣādiq (as) on this verse says

“A believer, for another believer, is like a single body. If one of the organs is in pain all the other parts of the body are also troubled”.

There is so much that can be discussed under this topic but we shall suffice in discussing three basic aspects of treating a Muslim like a brother:

- **Protecting a Fellow Believer’s Reputation:** there was once in Khorasān (today-Iran) a very wise scholar and judge called Sheikh Hatim. Once a respectable lady came to him and asked if he could meet with her in private regarding a case. The Sheikh agreed and they went into the court chambers. During this talk, whilst she was talking, she burped and being an honourable woman, was deeply embarrassed and ashamed, especially that she was near the judge! To stop her from being embarrassed, the judge pretended not to hear and said, “Do you know that I have become hard of hearing for some time now, could you please repeat what you said and say it loudly?” The woman felt very much at ease and continued without too much embarrassment. For a long time after this, the Sheikh pretended to be hard of hearing and became known as Hatim the deaf^{xii}.

The emphasis on not revealing the secrets is so great that the Holy Prophet has said “*Gatherings are trusts*”. Just as much as you would not betray your brother or sister by revealing their secrets to others or embarrassing them, we must not reveal a believers secrets to others either.



- Putting the need of your fellow believer before your own^{xiii}. Allah (SWT) has told us in the Holy Qur’an:

“And those who made their abode in the city and in the faith before them love those who have fled to them, and do not find in their hearts a need of what they are given, and prefer (them) before themselves though poverty may afflict them, and whoever is preserved from the niggardliness of his soul, these it is that are the successful ones.” (59:9)^{xiv}.

This verse refers to the Anṣār (the helpers), the people of Medina, who accepted Islam when it was opposed tooth and nail by the pagans of Mecca, and who invited the Holy Prophet to settle down in Medina and become their leader. Once the Prophet (saw) arrived in Medina, many Muslims followed him there. They came to be known as the Muhājirīn (the migrants). The Muhājirīn were forced to leave all their property and wealth in Mecca by the pagans of Quraysh, so they arrived in Medina with nothing. The Anṣār now had to not only look after their own livelihood, but also needed to take care of the Muhājirīn. Despite their own state of need, they did not show any hesitation in sharing all they had with their new guests. The Prophet (saw) paired every one of the Muhājirīn with one of the Anṣār, and these two became brothers in the words of the Prophet. The person from the Anṣār would then share his job, his house and his wealth with his brother from Mecca. The faith of the Anṣār was so strong that they did this willingly and shared all of their belongings.

Another example of this value is the following story about Imam ‘Ali (as):

Once, having come to know that there was no food in the house, Imam ‘Ali (as) borrowed a dinar and went to the market to buy some food. There he found Miqdād crossing a street. He was walking to pass the time as in his house also there was no food. He could not bear the sorry plight of his children. When the Imam found out the real cause for Miqdād’s distress, he gave him the dinar that he himself had borrowed to feed his children.

These are mere examples of the noble social principles Allah, the Generous, has laid out for us in the Holy Qur’an. Certainly, just by pondering upon and studying the effects of such social laws, one has to acknowledge that the Holy Qur’an is truly a miracle!

Homework

1. What are the two fundamental ways of understanding the Holy Qur’an?

Lesson 3: Sciences of the Qur’an

In the previous lessons, we have discussed that everyone at any level can benefit from the Qur’an as long as they are sincere in their quest for the Truth. In this lesson, we shall try to understand a little more about this amazing treasure Allah has bestowed upon us and how we can begin to grasp its message and be touched by its miracle.

THE HOLY QUR’AN IS THE PRIMARY SOURCE

Due to the unadulterated nature of the Qur’an, it is the primary reference for Muslims for all aspects of religion. The Qur’an introduces itself as the “**guidance for the worlds**” (3:96); and “**the manifest light**” (4:174). Furthermore, Allah, the All Wise, has laid down solutions for every human problem in the Qur’an very clearly. The Holy Qur’an says:

“and We have revealed the Book to you explaining clearly everything” (16:89)

And the Qur’an is:

“...a guidance for mankind and clear evidence of guidance and discrimination (between right and wrong)”. (2:185).

The Holy Qur’an, as a source of knowledge, not only has knowledge of this world and its intricacies, but more importantly contains knowledge of the ‘unseen’, without which we would have no idea that such a world as the unseen world even existed^{xv}. Allah tells His Prophet in the Qur’an:

"This is of the news of the Unseen which We reveal unto you; neither you nor your people knew it before this." (11:49)

In the past and today, some have denied the use of the Holy Qur’an as a primary source or ‘valid evidence’ because they say that the Qur’an is too ‘ambiguous’. The reality is though that only a small proportion of the verses of the Qur’an are ambiguous while most have a clear meaning. In fact, it is so clear that our Imams have advised us that if we want to determine whether something they have said is authentic or not, one way is to check it against the principles established in the Qur’an! Imam al-Ṣādiq (as) said:

"Everything is considered according to God's Book and traditions. Whatever tradition does not agree with God's Book is rejected."^{xvi}

WHAT DOES THE QUR'AN CONTAIN?

1) Knowing God, Revelation, Quran	30%	1920 Ayah
2) The Hereafter	25/8%	1640 Ayah
3) Mission of the Previous Prophets	23/5%	1500 Ayah
4) Islamic Ummah & People of the Book	11/7%	736 Ayah
5) Statutes (Fiqh & Ethics)	7%	456 Ayah
6) Jihad	4%	260 Ayah
7) Creation, Man, Jinn & Satan	3%	190 Ayah
8) Family of the Prophet (P)	.35%	22 Ayah
TOTAL	105/35%	6724 Ayah

The total percentage is more than %100 and the numbers of the Ayaat are more than the actual numbers as some of the Ayaat include more than one subject.

Source: M. Bazargan, *Evolution Du Coran*, p.165

Many of us have undoubtedly opened the Holy Qur'an on many occasions, read it and tried to understand what Allah is trying to tell us through the words. But we often do not realise that the Qur'an has the information and knowledge to help us in all aspects of life, be it being successful in business, passing an exam at school, improving our relationships with others, *anything*.

While the Qur'an may not give specific information on minor issues, its miracle is that it establishes solid 'principles' or 'laws' and provides a genuine seeker of The Truth a means of finding the answers they seek. Allah encourages us to seek knowledge, think, ponder, and travel to find answers! Those issues that humankind, by their endeavour, thought and persistence can find the answers to are not spelled out in the Qur'an, but examples are mentioned for people to think.

On the other hand, the real knowledge which humankind can perhaps never grasp fully (until death perhaps), Allah explains in the Qur'an! It is very clear from the analysis of the different topics in the Qur'an, that a majority of the verses discuss matters related to various issues including social, political, historical, cultural, spiritual and other related matters. Only a very small proportion, seven per cent (456 verses) relates to problems of jurisprudence.

Now the question is: What is then the Qur'an's general theme? The Qur'an itself answers this by saying that it is a book of guidance, guiding man towards his spiritual and social perfection.

HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND THE QUR'AN?

CLEAR AND ALLEGORICAL VERSES

As we mentioned earlier, some schools of thought in Islam such as the Akhbaryūn, believe that the Qur'an is difficult to understand as it has allegorical verses. However, a proper analysis shows that the majority of the Qur'an contains verses that are clear in their meaning (*Muḥkamāt*) whilst others are allegorical or ambiguous (*Mutashābihāt*). The latter group can have more than one meaning. This may occur for a number of reasons:

- The limitations of human languages, including Arabic, mean that it is impossible to describe the realities of the Unseen World. Thus Allah (SWT) describes it in the best way possible in a human language, but this can still have some ambiguity because the reader has not experienced that world
- The nature of language and communication is that one expression can have many different meanings. We observe this in our daily lives all the time
- Some āyāt teach a concept through an example, or use similes to explain certain realities. This can lead to more than one meaning being understood by the reader

Allah (SWT) says in the Qur'an:

“He it is Who has revealed the Book to you; some of its verses are decisive, they are the basis of the Book, and others are ambiguous; then as for those in whose hearts there is perversity they follow the part of it which is ambiguous, seeking to mislead and seeking to give it (their own) interpretation. But none knows its interpretation except Allah, and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge, (They) say: We believe in it, it is all from our Lord; and none do mind except those having understanding.”(3:7)

When faced with ambiguous āyāt that we find difficult to understand, we must refer to the clear, established āyāt in order to interpret those ambiguous ones. Therefore, the Qur'an remains a primary source that is understandable to us. Our second source of information when it comes to interpreting these ambiguous āyāt are the words of the infallible guides, the Ahlul Bayt (as).

ABROGATING AND ABROGATED VERSES

Another feature of the Holy Qur'an is that there are some āyāt in the Qur'an that abrogate others. Most of the time, the situation is not one of real abrogation. Rather, it is a gradual introduction of a rule. For example, the āyāt related to the impermissibility of alcohol were revealed gradually. Initially, Muslims were encouraged to avoid alcohol, until eventually they were ordered to avoid it altogether. The later āyāt were continuing the education process about alcohol. They were not contradicting one another or changing the rule.^{xvii}

There is one true example of abrogation in the Qur'an. This occurred when the Muslims were initially ordered by Allah (SWT) to pay charity before meeting with the Prophet. None except Imam 'Ali (as) followed this order. Then another āyah was revealed lifting this obligation. It is important to understand that this was not because Allah (SWT) 'changed his mind'. Rather, there were many lessons for the Muslims in the revelation of the first āyah and then in changing the rule, the first of these lessons being that the time of the Prophet (saw) was valuable and should be respected.

Furthermore, in cases where a rule is altered, some of our scholars believe that in our time today, if we are faced with the same contextual situation as the revelation of earlier āyāt, we can use them as a reference and a guide to act in those situations.

“When We substitute one Ayah for another, and Allah knows best what He reveals (in stages), they say you are but a forger. But most of them don't understand.”
(16:101)

OTHER FACTORS

In order to understand the Qur'an, it is also important to appreciate the unique style of the Qur'an such that in some cases, the rule is general whilst in other cases it is limited to a particular situation or circumstance and all this can be determined by finding out why a particular verse was revealed (asbābun nuzūl) and the environment in which it was revealed. For example, the āyāt speaking about warfare and killing of polytheists were revealed at times when Muslims were being attacked by such people constantly, whereas the āyāt about peace and forgiveness were more general, and

apply in situations where Muslims are not being attacked or oppressed.

Despite all of this, although the principles of our faith are explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an, the detailed explanation of these verses and their application was the task of the Messenger of Allah and his pure progeny (Ahlul Bayt). This was illustrated by Imam al-Ṣādiq (as) when his close companion Abu Baṣīr asked him concerning '**those of you who are in authority**' in āyah 59 of Surah 4:

"O you who believe! Obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those of you who are in authority."

The Imam replied: "It is meant for Imam 'Ali, Imam Ḥasan and Imam Ḥusayn (as)."

Abu Baṣīr mentioned that people ask as why the names of 'Ali and the Ahlul Bayt of the Prophet (P) are not mentioned explicitly in the Qur'an.

The Imam (as) replied: "Tell them: Daily Prayers were prescribed to the Prophet (saw), yet Allah did not mention the numbers of its rak'āt, for He left it to His Messenger to explain it. Similarly, Allah prescribed Zakāt, yet He did not mention to pay one silver for 40 Mithqāl of silver. He prescribed Ḥajj yet did not mention that the Ṭawāf is seven times for He left the explanation of all of these to His Messenger."^{xviii}

APPLYING THE MESSAGE OF THE QUR'AN

In this lesson, we will continue our discussion about the social lessons that the Qur'an teaches us. One of the most important of these lessons is goodness to parents.

GOODNESS TO PARENTS

In many parts of the Holy Qur'an, Allah (SWT) puts goodness to parents as second only to worshipping Allah and believing in His unity. This shows just how much emphasis the Qur'an places on this obligation.

“And your Lord has commanded that you shall not serve (any) but Him, and that you should be good to your parents. If either or both of them reach old age with you, say not to them (so much as) "Ugh" and do not use harsh words with them, and speak to them honourably” (17:23)

Unfortunately as we get older, many of us become more audacious towards our parents and begin to use harsh words with them and criticise them. We often do not see the sense behind what they are asking us to do so we ignore it and we get angry if they persist in advising us and sometimes, God forbid, we shout at them or use harsh words. This is a major sin, to the extent that our Imams tell us that even if our parents were at fault in yelling at us and we look them with harshness, our prayers will not be accepted until we ask them for forgiveness. As you can see, the Qur'an says that do not even say so much as 'oof' to your parents, especially as they are getting older.

Sometimes we need to take a step back and think about why our parents are telling us to do a certain thing which we may not like. They have a lot more life experience than we do, and they have only our best interests at heart. Therefore, they are more likely to be right than us, and we should consider what they say instead of getting angry very quickly.

We should also train ourselves to take one step further and serve our parents, because this is one of the best paths to paradise. Once, a man came to the Prophet (saw) and said: 'O Messenger of Allah, there is no bad deed but that I have done it, is there any way for me to repent? The Prophet (saw) asked: 'Are either of your parents alive?' The man answered: 'my father'. The Prophet (saw) said: 'go and be good to him!' When the person left, the Prophet (saw) said: 'I wish that it were his mother (who was alive)'".

Review Questions

1. **Outline the major topics contained in the Qur'an and briefly explain what the majority of the verses talk about and why?**
2. **How are the ambiguous āyāt of the Qur'an interpreted?**

3. What do we mean by 'abrogation' in the Qur'an?

Lesson 4: Qur'an and the Intellect

In this lesson, we will attempt to discuss the relationship between the Qur'an and our intellect. We want to find out what role our intellect plays in understanding our religion, as well as the limitations of using our intellect in trying to understand our religion.

INTERPRETING THE QUR'AN BASED ON UNFOUNDED OPINION

Many Prophetic narrations denounce the interpretation of the Qur'an based on unfounded opinion (Tafsir Bil Ra'y). A person by the name of Qatadah visited Imam al-Bāqir (as) and the Imam (as) asked him: "*Are you the scholar of the people of Baṣrah?*" He replied: "*This is what they think.*" The Imam (as) then said: "*I have come to know that you interpret the Qur'an.*" He replied: "*Yes, I do.*" (The tradition continues until where) the Imam (as) says:

"O Qatadah, if you have interpreted the Qur'an in accordance with your own views, then you have certainly perished and have also caused others to perish, and if you have interpreted it in accordance with the views of others, then you have perished and have caused others to perish. Woe to you! No one knows the Qur'an except those who have been addressed by it."^{xix}

The prohibited interpretation of the Qur'an can mean one of the following types of interpretation:

- 1) An interpretation of the Qur'an without any scholarly support. For instance, if someone interprets the Qur'an without being acquainted with the basic sciences necessary for understanding the Qur'an.

- 2) An interpretation of the Qur'an without referring to, or by going against, the narrations of the Ahlul Bayt (as), who have been give true understanding of the Holy Qur'an.
- 3) An interpretation of the Qur'an which aims at supporting and justifying a wrong doctrine be it jurisprudential, theological, philosophical, mystical etc. A wrong doctrine is the one which is contrary to the basic teachings of Islam.

This form of interpretation of the Qur'an is the very reason that today we have so much division in the Muslim community as each group interprets the words of the Qur'an in their own way, for their own desire, for political or personal benefits.

The scholars who comment on the meanings of the Qur'an in the correct way are simply trying to unveil the meaning of the Qur'anic words, rather than interpret them. They try to find the meaning of the āyāt to the best of their ability using the narrations and other sciences such as the sciences of language, rhetoric, grammar etc...They avoid using external evidence which has no authority in an Islamic sense, such as their own opinions or false narrations.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INTELLECT

As we have discussed in previous years and in previous lessons as well, the Holy Qur'an has the answers to all of mankind's' problems provided they exercise their intellect (*'aql*) and make use of their knowledge to attain the ultimate truth (*ḥaqq*) as opposed to imitating others and following their low desires. Allah, in numerous places in the Qur'an, has advised and commanded us to use our intellect to understand not only creation, but everything around us and emphasises the use of evidence in arriving at the truth. Allah says

Memorisation Task

قُلْ هَاتُوا بُرْهَانَكُمْ إِن كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

“Say: Bring your proof if you are truthful.” (2: 111)

The importance of intellect cannot be underestimated. It has been narrated that:

“Indeed, the Allah, the Great and Almighty, created reason from stored, hidden light through His previous knowledge with which He acquainted neither the

Prophets, the envoys, nor the angles brought nigh...Then He, the Great and Almighty, said to reason: turn back and it turned back. Then, He said to it: Come and it came. Then He said to it: Speak, and it said: Praise belongs to Allah who has neither support, nor rival, nor likeness, nor match, nor equal, towards whose mightiness all things are humble. Hence, Allah the Blessed and Exalted, said: I swear by My might and majesty, I have never created a creature better than you, more obedient than you, higher than you, nobler than you, dearer than you...Through you my Unity is confessed...Through you I will reward, and through you I will punish”.^{xxi}

DEVELOPING THE INTELLECT^{xxi}

In order to arrive at the Truth in any matter, it is very important to ensure that the intelligence is not corrupted and matures in purity. This can be done by:

- 1) **Avoiding negative influences:** This means, avoiding things that are contrary to our pure conscience. For instance, we are certain about the harms of alcohol, and so we need to avoid any situation which may make us inclined to drink alcohol or be exposed to its harmful effect or even consider it to be normal! The most practical ways of avoiding negative influences is:
 - a. **Frequenting places of intellect:** This means, avoid listening to and hanging around people who have nothing intellectual to say and on the other hand being around, listening to people or going to places where you learn something and you are forced to think and ponder. This nurtures one's intellect.
 - b. **Avoiding Foolish friends:** It is important to avoid friends who would justify bad actions and convince us not to ponder and think.
 - c. **Follow our intellect not our desire:** Whenever we come across a situation where we cannot decide whether we should do something or not, we should consult our self, which will make the wrong path desirable to us. We should always try to oppose our self and take more difficult path, usually confirmed by our intellect. The Holy Prophet (saw) said:

“Struggle against the desires of yourself and wisdom will enter your hearts”^{xxii}

2) **Don't follow blindly**- Most people are such that they accept whatever beliefs that are current in their society. They adopt certain beliefs merely for the reason that they were followed by their preceding generation. The Qur'an bids people to carefully scrutinize all ideas and judge them by the criteria of reason --neither to follow blindly the conventional beliefs and traditions of their ancestors, nor to reject them totally without any rational justification. Allah Says in the Qur'an:

“And when it is said to them: 'Follow what God has sent down', they say, 'No; but we will follow such things as we found our fathers doing.' What? Even if their fathers had no understanding of anything, and if they were not guided?” (2:170)

The way we cut our hair, the way we dress, what we eat, what we read, what we watch, what we play etc. Everything needs to be scrutinised to ensure that it is rational and has some benefit for us.

3) **Maintain objectivity**: This means we need to know and understand all sides of the story before we make a judgement, and to not allow our personal interests or emotions to influence our judgment.

The Limits of the Intellect

As much as we are encouraged to use our mind and intellect, we also have to understand the limits of our intellect. Sometimes, our intellect is not developed enough to understand a reality that is expressed in the Qur'an. In such a situation, we should not put full trust in our intellect and, God forbid, reject what is in the Qur'an. Rather, we should understand that our intellect is too weak and submit to the Qur'an until Allah (SWT) blesses us to understand it better.

We also need to remember that some things are beyond the scope of our intellect, and that our intellect itself realises this. This is usually the cases when it comes to things related to the 'Unseen World'. Again, in such situations, we should understand the limits of our own intellects and submit to the realities within the Qur'an.

Review Questions

1. Find at least 10 references from the Qur'an that tells mankind to ponder, think or use their intellect.
2. Choose one of the scientific miracles of the Qur'an and compare what the Qur'an says to what scientists today say. You can do this as an assignment in groups of two or three. You will have four weeks to complete this task.

ⁱ Hadith al Thaqalayn- For the Sunni sources containing *Hadith al-Thaqalayn*, see: *Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, part iii, pp. 14, 17, 26, 59 Others who have reported it are Muslim in his *Sahih* and many others.

ⁱⁱ In the early years of the advent of Islam, the chiefs of Quraysh had banned listening to the Qur'an. The Qur'an in narration of that event states: "**And those who disbelieve say: Listen not to this Qur'an, and make noise in the midst of its (recitation) that you may overcome.**" [41:26] Ironically, however, the magnet of the Qur'an was so pleasant that the chiefs of Quraysh themselves could not but enjoy listening to it. Thus, they used to secretly listen to it.

ⁱⁱⁱ The following is a quote from Keith L Moore, one of the most famous anatomists of the last half century. Most universities use his anatomy textbooks and in these he includes Qur'anic quote about embryology in his introductions:

"Statements referring to human reproduction and development are scattered throughout the Qur'an. It is only recently that the scientific meaning of some of these verses has been appreciated fully. . . . He makes you in the wombs of your mothers, in stages, one after another, in three veils of darkness."

This statement is from Sura 39. . . . Doctors in the 7th century A.D. likely knew that the human embryo developed in the uterus. It is unlikely that they knew that it developed in stages, even though Aristotle described the stages of development of the chick embryo in the 4th century B.C. The realization that the human embryo develops in stages was not discussed and illustrated until the 15th century. . . .

"The three veils of darkness" may refer to: (1) the anterior abdominal wall; (2) the uterine wall; and (3) the amniochorionic membrane. . . .

"Then We placed him as a drop in a place of rest." This statement is from Sura 23:13. The drop or *nutfa* has been interpreted as the sperm [but a better interpretation is] the zygote which divides to form a blastocyst which is implanted in the uterus ("a place of rest"). This interpretation is supported by another verse in the Qur'an which states that "a human being is created from a mixed drop." The zygote forms by the union of a mixture of the sperm and the ovum ("The mixed drop").

"Then We made the drop into a leech-like structure." This statement is from Sura 23:14. [Leech] is an appropriate description of the human embryo from days 7-24 when it clings to the endometrium of the uterus, in the same way that the leech clings to the skin. Just as the leech derives blood from the host, the human embryo derives blood from the decidua or pregnant endometrium. It is remarkable how much the embryo of 23-24 days resembles a leech. As there [was no microscopy] in the 7th century, doctors would not have known [about] this leech-like appearance.

"Then of that leech-like structure, We made a chewed lump." This statement is also from Sura 23:14. . . . Toward the end of the fourth week, the human embryo looks somewhat like a chewed lump of flesh [resulting] from the somites which resemble teeth marks. . . .

"Then we made out of the chewed lump bones, and clothed the bones in flesh." This continuation of Sura 23:14 indicates that out of the chewed lump stage, bones and muscles form. This is in accordance with embryological development. First the bones form as cartilage models and then the muscles (flesh) develop around them[.]

"Then we developed out of it another creature." This next part of Sura 23:14 . . . may refer to the human-like embryo that forms by the end of the eighth week. This [fetus] may be the new creature to which the verse refers.

"And He gave you hearing and sight and feeling and understanding." This part of Sura 32:9 indicates that the special senses of hearing, seeing, and feeling develop in this order, which is true. . . .

"Then out of a piece of chewed flesh, partly formed and partly unformed." This part of Sura 22:5 seems to indicate that the embryo is composed of both differentiated and undifferentiated tissues. . . . The interpretation of the verses in the Qur'an referring to human development would not have been possible in the 7th century A.D., or even a hundred years ago. We can

interpret them now because the science of modern Embryology affords us new understanding. Undoubtedly there are other verses in the Qur'an related to human development that will be understood in the future as our knowledge increases."

^{iv} In 1929 Hubble discovered that the universe is constantly expanding. This is clearly mentioned in the Qur'an. (51:47)

^v Although the Qur'an was compiled during the last 23 years of the life of the Prophet (P) certain related words have the same frequency in the Qur'an. For instance, the term Dunya (this world) is repeated 115 times and its opposite, i.e. Akhirat (the hereafter) is also repeated 115 times. Life is used 145 times and death is also used 145 times. Tongue is used 25 times and so is sermon. Man is used 24 times and so is woman. The word 'yawm' (day) is used 365 times, while the word 'shahr' (month) is used 12 times.

Also, the word sea is used 32 times, and the word land or earth 12 times, and if we add up the total words of both "sea" and "land" we get 45. Now if we do a simple calculation:

$$32/45 \times 100\% = 71.11111111\%$$

$$13/45 \times 100\% = 28.88888888\%$$

Above is what we know today, the percentages of Water (Sea) and Land in the world

^{vi} The Sacred "al-Hadith al-Qudsi" - Moulana Zaki Baqri- <http://www.imamreza.net/eng/imamreza.php?id=3220> and eHawza semester 4- Sciences of Qur'an, Lesson 2

^{vii} For a full reference of all the accusations in regards to the Qur'an, please refer to The book Qur'an: Protection from Alteration- Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi - <http://www.al-islam.org/protection/>

^{viii} Refer to Chapter 13, http://www.al-islam.org/tahrif_Qur'an/

^{ix} eHawza Semester 4- lesson 4 – Teachers should recount the story of how Imam Ali used to visit the Prophet every night to get lessons on all the verses revealed that day, and even paid for these lessons when he was required to when no one else would.

^x The best example of this kind of interpretation is Al-Mizan by Ayatollah Tabataba'ee

^{xi} Introduction to the Science of Tafsir of the Qur'an by Ayatullah Ja'far Subhani. http://www.al-islam.org/ulum_al_Qur'an/

^{xii} Moral Values of the Qur'an, Commentary on Surah Hujuraat, Ayatullah Dastaghaib Shirazi.

^{xiii} Another story that could be used here is: Al-Waqidi, the famous historian of al-Mamun's period, narrates: "I had two very close friends, one of whom was a Hashimite. Truly speaking, we were one spirit in three bodies. Once, on the occasion of 'id (Islamic festival), I was reduced to poverty. My wife told me that we could face together all the hardships boldly, but her heart was burning for the children. They were looking at other children wearing new dresses and making jubilant preparation for 'id; whereas their lot was worn and torn clothes. She asked me, if possible, to arrange some money for buying dresses for them. I thought and thought but could not find any way of obtaining money. At last, I wrote a letter to my Hashimite friend for help. My friend sent me a sealed packet containing one thousand Dirhams. Before I could open the packet, a message came from my second friend with a request of help, I sent him the same packet intact and went to the mosque, heart-broken and depressed, I passed the whole night in the mosque as I could not bring myself to face my wife. But when I went home next morning, to my great surprise, my wife welcomed me with a smiling face and expressed her unbounded pleasure for the help I had rendered to my friend.

It was then that my Hashimite friend came to me and asked me what I had done with the money he had sent me the day before. I narrated to him the whole story. He bent his head for a moment, then told me that on receipt of my message, he had sent me whatever he had, but then to meet his own requirements he wrote to the third friend for help. The third friend sent him the same sealed packet. My first friend was extremely puzzled by this mystery, till I solved it." Al-Waqidi further adds: "Then we divided that amount equally amongst us at the rate of three hundred Dirhams each, and the remaining one hundred Dirhams was the share of my wife. Caliph al-Ma'mun hearing this unique story called me, and I narrated the whole event. Al-Ma'mun awarded us two thousand Dirhams each and one thousand to my wife." (Muraju' dh-dhahab by Mas'udi, Beirut 1966, vol.3, p.446)

^{xiv} This verse states that the successful ones in this world and the next are those that put others ahead of themselves. Hisham, narrates that "During the battle of Uhud, I went to find my cousin on the battlefield, and when I found him, he was breathing his last. I brought some water and tried to drop it in his dry mouth. He closed his lips tightly and pointed toward another believer next to him. I went to the other soldier, and found him dying as well with parched lips. I tried to drop some water in his mouth and he closed his lips as well,

pointing to yet another wounded soldier. When I reached the third man, he had already died, so I went back to the second man and he had met with his Lord too, so I went to my cousin who had died too!" (Commentary of the verse by Aga Mahdi Pooya)

^{xv} It is advised that teachers read and refer to the simile of the cave by Plato to help the students understand the concept of revelation.

http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~wldciv/world_civ_reader/world_civ_reader_1/plato.html but can be referred to from eHawza Semester 1, Course 1 lesson 3 – Sources of Islamic Knowledge

^{xvi} Mishkaatul Anwaar- Tradition 799

^{xvii} The stages are:

1. ***"And from the fruit of the date palm and the vine, you get out intoxicant drinks and wholesome food; behold, in this also is a Sign for those who are wise."*** (16:67).
2. ***"They ask you concerning wine and gambling. Say: In them is great sin and some profit for people, but the sin is greater than the profit."*** (2:219).
3. ***"O you who believe! Approach not prayers whilst you are drunk so that you can understand all that you say".***(4:43)
4. ***"O you who believe! Intoxicants and gambling, (dedication of) stones, and (divination by) arrows are an abomination of Satan's handiwork; refrain from such abomination, that you may prosper."***(5:90).

^{xviii} Ayatollah Al-Khoei in Al-bayaan p251

^{xix} Ayatollah al Khoei in Zawahir al-Qur'an: The Authority of the Book's Literal Meanings <http://www.al-islam.org/al-tawhid/khui/bayan.htm>

^{xx} Uyuun Akhbaar Redha – and Al Kafi- Chapter on intellect

^{xxi} Obtained from Al-Tawhid Understanding the Uniqueness of the Qur'an by Murtada Mutahhari <http://www.al-islam.org/al-tawhid/unique-Qur'an.htm>

^{xxii} Mizan-ul-Hikmah – Tradition 1218