

(.Exegesis of Imam al-Reza(A.S

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Imam al-Reza (A.S.) did not author a book on exegesis, but he explained the meanings of the verses about which he was questioned by others who wanted to know his views in their regard, and we will indicate here some such explanations in order to acquaint you with the magnificent method and innovative style of the Imam (A.S.) in this regard.

It is reported that al-Mamoon asked him once to explain some Qur'anic verses out of his curiosity about the knowledge God bestowed upon the Imam regarding their meanings. Among such verses was: "He it is Who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and His throne was over the waters, that He might try you which of you is best in conduct."¹ He said, "The Praised and Exalted God created the Throne, the water, and the angels before the creation of heavens and earth, and the angels used to know God through their own creation, through the Throne and the water.

Then He made His Throne over the water in order to manifest His might to the angels so that they might know that He is capable of doing whatever He pleased. Then He raised the Throne through His might, moved it and made it above the seven heavens. Then He created the heavens and the earth in six days while He was omni-Potent on His Throne. He was capable of creating them in a twinkle of the eye, but the Exalted One created them in six days in order to show the angels what He was creating one after the other so that they would know time and again that God was the Originator of each and every thing. God did not create the Throne because He was in need for it since He is independent of the Throne and of everything He created; He cannot be described by anything in the cosmos simply because He has no physical body; Exalted He is above the characteristics of what He created a great deal of Exaltation.

"As regarding His saying, `...that He might try you which one of you is best in conduct,' He has created them in order to test them through the responsibility of obeying and worshipping Him, not out of His desire to test or try them, since He already knows all things."

This glorious explanation of the Imam (A.S.) for the creation of the heavens and the earth in six days is considered, we think, among the best explanations because gradual creation and perfection deepens the feeling of awe regarding the greatness of the Creator and Originator more than had it been at once.

Al-Mamoon also asked him about the meaning of the verse: "Had it been thy Lord's Will, they

would all have believed, all who are on earth! Will you then compel mankind, against their will, to believe?! No soul can believe except by the Will of God."² Quoting his forefathers, al-Reza (A.S.) said: "Muslims said to the Messenger of God (S.A.W.), 'We wish you forced those whom you have conquered, O Messenger of God, to accept Islam, so that our number would increase, and we would become stronger in the face of our enemies.' The Messenger of God (S.A.W.)

said: 'I am not going to meet God, the Almighty and the Exalted, having invented an innovation which He did not command me to do, nor am I the type of person who forces others to do anything at all.' It was then that this verse was revealed: 'Had it been thy Lord's Will, they would all have believed, all who are on earth,' by means of forcing them, or when they find no other choice while in this world just as

those who believed only after seeing God's might and retribution in the life after death. 'If I do such a thing to them, they would not deserve any reward, but I wish they accept it out of their own choice rather than being forced to do so in order that they will deserve to be close to me and blessed through me, and they would remain in Paradise forever.'

"As regarding the meaning of 'No soul can believe except by the Will of God,' it does not mean that it is prohibited from believing (without a prior consent of God); it simply means that God invites it to believe without forcing it to do so." The Imam (A.S.) said the following in his explanation of the verse which says: "[God is He] Who has made the earth your couch, and the heavens your canopy":³

"He made the earth suitable to the creation of your nature, agreeable to your bodies; He did not make it too hot to burn you, nor too cold to freeze you, nor too windy to cause you dizziness, nor too stinky to damage your heads, nor as liquid as water to cause you to drown, nor too solid to enable you to build houses and graves for your dead; rather, the Exalted and Sublime made it strong enough to be useful for you, for your bodies, and for your buildings, making it usable in your homes and graves and a great deal of other advantages as well; thus, He made the earth a couch for you.

"As for the heavens, He made them like a protective ceiling above your heads in which He let the sun and its moon and the stars orbit for your own good. He '... sent down water from the heavens, and brought forth therewith fruits for your sustenance,' meaning thereby water which He caused to descend from a high altitude in order to reach the summits of your mountains and hills, valleys and plains, which He caused to descend as showers and as moisture which soil inhales, and He did not cause it to pour down at once to ruin your lands, trees and other vegetation and fruits. 'And brought forth therewith fruits for your sustenance'⁴ means whatever grows on earth for your sustenance, so 'Do not set up rivals unto God when

ye know (the truth),'⁵ that is, 'rivals' such as similitudes and such things like idols which have no comprehension, hearing, sight, or are able to do anything at all, while you know that they cannot create any of these great blessings with which He, your Lord, the Exalted, the Most High, has blessed you."

This simple explanation provided by the Imam (A.S.) gives the meaning of the verse clarity and ease which can be comprehended by anyone, even one whose share of intelligence is most modest, enabling him to appreciate the magnificence, beauty, and perfection of the creation. He may even explain the important points in a verse which may cause the wisdom of their making as we find him doing with the last verse in order to point out the depth of miraculous aspect of the verses of the Holy Qur'an

The Holy Qur'an and the Infallibility of the Prophets

In the subject of the infallibility of Prophets, the Imam (A.S.) was asked to explain the meanings of some verses whose superficial meanings suggested that Prophets were not infallible at all, that they were liable to commit sins. In our discussion of queries above, we dealt with this subject when we discussed the dialogue between the Imam (A.S.) and Ali ibn al-Jahm, while here we would like to mention more of the same regarding questions al-Mamoon put forth to the Imam (A.S.) inquiring about such verses:

Adam At one of the meetings arranged by al-Mamoon, the latter asked the Imam (A.S.): "O Son of the Messenger of God (S.A.W.)! Don't you claim that Prophets are infallible?" The Imam (A.S.) answered in the affirmative. Al-Mamoon then asked, "Then what is the meaning of the verse, 'Thus did Adam disobey his Lord and allow himself to be seduced'?"

" The Imam answered this question by explaining that God had forbidden Adam and Eve from coming close to a particular tree without forbidding them from eating its fruit or the fruit of similar trees. They obeyed God by not coming near that tree, but Iblis (Eblis) confused them in this regard and suggested that they should eat not from that tree but from other similar trees, swearing to them by God that he was only providing them with an advice.

So they believed in his oath and they ate the fruit of a similar tree, and that was before Adam was considered as a Prophet and before his descent to earth, and what he did was not a sin for which the penalty is Hellfire, but it was a minor disobedience which could be forgiven and could be committed by Prophets before wahi (revelation) reaches them. When God chose him and made him a Prophet, he became infallible and was not permitted to commit a sin, minor or major, telling him, "Thus did Adam disobey his Lord and allow himself to be seduced. But his Lord chose him (for His Grace); He turned to him, and gave him guidance

Ibrahim, the Friend of God

Then he asked him about Ibrahim (Abraham) al-Khalil (A.S.), the Friend of God, and about the stage of doubt through which he passed as appears superficially in the Holy Qur'an when he is mentioned, till truth became manifest to him and he believed therein. The Almighty says: "When the night covered him over, he saw a star. He said: 'This is my Lord.' But when it set, he said, 'I do not love those that set.' When he saw the moon rising in splendour, he said, 'This is my Lord.

' But the moon set, so he said, 'Unless my Lord guides me, I shall surely be among those who go astray.' When he saw the sun rising in splendour, he said, 'This is my Lord; this is the greatest (of all).' But when the sun set, he said, 'O my people! I am indeed free from your (guilt) of giving partners to God. For me, I have set my face firmly and truly towards Him Who created the heavens and the earth, and never shall I give partners to God.'" ⁶ About this, the Imam comments thus:

"Ibrahim (A.S.) did not pass by a stage of doubt in God; rather, his story may be summarized thus: He lived in a society where three types of worship dominated: the worship of Venus, the worship of the moon, and the worship of the sun. The outward pretense of Ibrahim (A.S.) to follow these religions before declaring his belief in God was only to deny the validity of each one of them and to prove to others the fact that they were invalid, not due to his temporary belief in them. He simply wanted to prove to their followers, through the method of argument which he employed in a spirit filled with belief in Him, that their type of creed and their norm of worship of Venus, the moon, and the sun, were not appropriate due to the variation which occurred to them and which is one of the attributes of the creature, not the Creator."

Then the Imam (A.S.) adds saying, "What Ibrahim al-Khalil (A.S.) did was actually according to the inspiration he had received from God by the token of the verse that says, 'That was the reasoning about Us which We gave to Abraham (to use) against his people.'" ⁷ What he did, therefore, was merely a method to win the argument against his people regarding the invalidity of their norms of worship and in their belief in gods other than God, which is a unique method among Qur'anic methods to invite others to believe

Messengers and Despair

Al-Mamoon then asked him about the meaning of the verse which says, "... till the apostles give up hope (of their people) and (their people come to) think that they proved them to be liars, Our help will then come to them." ⁸ What may be a cause for questioning in this verse is to

attribute despair to God's Messengers after being promised help from God. Despair and despondency are forms of kufr (disbelief), for the Almighty has said, "Never give up hope of God's soothing mercy; truly none despairs of God's soothing mercy except those who have no faith."⁹ So, how can despair find its way to the heart of a messenger of God or a prophet, knowing that, according to this verse, only kafirs can do so, and what is a greater sin than committing kufr?!

What is superficially obvious from the text of this verse is that the time when they despaired was after receiving the Message and inspiration. To this, the Imam (A.S.) answers by saying that the subject of despair in this verse is not God's help promised to His messengers, but rather losing hope of their people ever believing in them and accepting their message; i.e. to believe in Him and renounce their previous disbelief and disobedience by their worship of gods other than God. The meaning of this verse, then, will be something like this: When the messengers lost hope that their people would ever believe in them, and when those people thought that they succeeded in proving those messengers as liars, it is then that Our help came to them.

Thus is the outward ambiguity of the verse removed, and thus does the Imam (A.S.), through providing such glorious meanings to the sacred verses of the Holy Qur'an whose outward meaning is actually the opposite of that of their context, dispel the cloud of doubt which may come to one's mind regarding the infallibility of Prophets. They are not mere justifications or one's own personal opinions but actual facts the upholding to whose contrary is not possible

God's "Hand" is His Might

There are other verses the superficial meaning of which gives the impression that God has limbs just as humans do which He uses to achieve His purpose, such as His statement addressing Iblis when the latter refused to prostrate to Adam as commanded by God: "What prohibited you from prostrating to what I have created in My own hands?" and also like the verse saying, "When a leg will be uncovered and they are invited to prostrate..."

The Imam (A.S.) explains the meaning of God's hand to be His might. The meaning of the previous verse would be, "What prohibited you from prostrating to what I have created by My might and potence?" God does not have eyes, legs, hands, or any such things as we may imagine which would put limits to God like those to man, and the revealed texts containing a reference to such things are given meanings which agree with conceiving God to be Exalted above having physical dimensions a great deal of Exaltation.

The "leg" is interpreted by the Imam as a barrier of light which, when removed, will cause the

believers to fall prostrating, while the legs of the hypocrites become too stiffened to prostrate. Thus does Imam al-Reza (A.S.) portray for us an accurate portrait which is honest in interpreting the meanings embedded in the Glorious Book if we wish to honestly and wisely interpret its verses.

One more thing remains to be indicated here. There are some narratives which contain some interpretations of Qur'anic verses attributed to Imam al-Reza (A.S.) the authenticity of which is questioned simply because some of those who reported them are not free of the practice of distortion or fabrication. What we feel comfortable about is that the fact that if such narrations do not contain anything which disagrees with the beliefs of followers of the Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.) regarding the interpretation of Qur'anic verses, they testify to their authentic reporting. Add to this the fact that we think it is quite unlikely that some narrators would deliberately tell lies about the Imam (A.S.) in cases where telling lies does not benefit the narrator a bit, particularly in the interpretations of the verses we have quoted above. This is why we find scholars of exegesis rely on such narratives and their likes in explaining the Holy Qur'an, and if they contradict one another, they accept the one which seems to have the most sound meaning, or to the ones which agree with the basic principles of the school of thought. In the case where the interpretation of certain verses becomes the basis of a legislative rule, or in the process of deriving one, then the authenticity of narration or interpretation has to be verified first as one provided by the Prophet (S.A.W.) or by members of his Ahl al-Bayt, peace be upon them, and attempts should be made to make sure that the integrity of their narrators is .not questioned

Notes:

1 Hud:7

2 Yunus:99-100

3 Al Baqara:22

4 Al Baqara:22

5 Ibid

6 Al An'aam:76-79

7 Al An'aam:83

8 Yousuf:110

9 Yousuf:87