

Allegorical Interpretation (Ta'wil) in the Holy Qur'an

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Based on the classification of the verses of the Qur'an into the definitive {muhkam} and the metaphorical {mutashabih}, and into the abrogating {nasikh} and the abrogated {mansukh}, in explaining some verses, one should not content himself with only their external purport because their external purport could be doubtful and misleading. Meanwhile, according to the traditions, the Qur'an has many cores and layers, the understanding which is not possible for everyone. As such, in understanding some verses, it is necessary to take other verses into account. For example, in interpreting verses such as

الرَّحْمَانُ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ اسْتَوَى

,The All-beneficent settled on the Throne

وَجَاءَ رَبُّكَ وَالْمَلَكُ صَفًّا صَفًّا

And Your Lord and the angels arrive in ranks, one must seek the assistance of other verses for clarity and correct interpretation such as

لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ

,Nothing is like Him

وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ

,Nor has He any equal

وَكَانَ اللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمًا .

And Allah has knowledge of all things. There are two approaches in dealing with these kinds of verses. One group is the literalists who content themselves with the literal meaning of the verses. The other group is the allegorists who take into account other verses in explaining and analyzing these kinds of verses, and they believe in allegorical interpretation {Ta'wil}. For settled on the Throne," they have said..." (عَلَى الْعَرْشِ اسْتَوَى) ,instance, in interpreting the verse that "'arsh" is the Throne exclusive for God where He is settled, but the allegorists have given two probabilities for this verse: (1) 'arsh is a thing having the three dimensions of width, height and depth; and (2) 'arsh alludes to a fact and concept having no material characteristics. It is worthy to note that abataba'i (Allamah Tr) accepts the first probability while the late Sha'rani (r) advocates the second probability. It must be emphasized that in interpreting these kinds of verses, those who content themselves with their literal meanings are committing an indescribable mistake and blunder. It is because if one believes in the literal interpretation of "...settled on the Throne," he must then assume God to have a physical body, while God is not a .body

Ta'wil according to the Wahhabis

'Abd al-'Aziz Muhammad Sultan, a Wahhabi writer, regards Ta'wil as having three meanings:

1. Ta'wil means translating a word from the preferable probability {ihtimal rajih} to the preferred probability {ihtimal marjuh}.
2. Ta'wil means interpretation of the word whether it is consistent or inconsistent with its literal sense.

3. Ta'wil means the unknown truth and quality which are known only to God.

Then, he writes that Ta'wil in any case is forbidden, and the exoteric meaning must not be turned into the esoteric one. The exoteric meaning must be maintained even if it is inconsistent with actuality and reason.

The Shi'ah, however, are of the opinion that with acceptable evidence a word can be separated from its literal meaning and be reunited with its esoteric and actual meaning. In this respect, proofs, pieces of evidence and verses of the Qur'an can be cited, but dealing lengthily with this subject is beyond the scope of this book.

The fact must be pointed out, nevertheless, that the Wahhabi practice of restricting their focus on the literal and exoteric meaning of the verses is extremely dangerous, and it will encounter

The Juhaymi nature of the Shi`ah

The Wahhabis identify the Shi`ah who make Ta'wil and tafsir of the verses of the Qur'an as "Juhaymis". This is because Juhaym ibn Safwan, who lived in the 2nd century AH, used to engage in Ta'wil and he believed in it. Of course, contrary to the notion of the Wahhabis, the Shi`ah do not follow that person on the subject of Ta'wil. They rather follow the pure Imams ('a) who have allegorically interpreted innumerable verses. The Qur'an itself talks about Ta'wil, using the word itself through the tongue of 'adrat Yusuf (Joseph) ('a) when he says

إِذْ قَالَ يُوسُفُ لِأَبِيهِ: يَا أَبَتِ إِنِّي رَأَيْتُ أَحَدَ عَشَرَ كَوْكَبًا وَالشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ رَأَيْتُهُمْ لِي سَاجِدِينَ .

When Joseph said to his father, 'Father! I saw eleven planets, and the sun and the moon: I saw them prostrating themselves before me'. After Yusuf ('a) was released from prison and became a chief {'aziz} in Egypt, and a famine engulfed Palestine and Egypt, the sons of Ya'qub (Jacob) ('a) came to Yusuf ('a) to get their ration of grains. After recognizing one another, Yusuf ('a) requested them to return to Egypt along with their father. When Ya'qub ('a) and his wife and sons saw Yusuf ('a) with such glory and grandeur, they prostrated before him. Then, Yusuf ('a) :recounted his childhood dream, saying

يَا أَبَتِ هَذَا تَأْوِيلُ رُؤْيَايَ مِنْ قَبْلُ .

Father! This is the fulfillment {Ta'wil} of my dream of long ago. The moon, the sun and eleven stars that prostrated before Yusuf ('a) were interpreted as referring to Ya'qub ('a), and his wife and 11 sons. Of course, the interpretation of this dream was not clear in the beginning for Yusuf ('a). After many years, however, the fulfillment of this dream was made manifest to them.

Therefore, Ta'wil means that when the meaning of a verse is not clear, by employing the assistance of other verses and reliable traditions, the meaning that is closer to the reality is .obtained

The Wahhabis have not trodden the path of enlightenment

Nowadays, the Wahhabis and some Shi`ah are traversing a path, which shows their close-mindedness, and will entail dangerous consequences prompting them to totally seclude themselves from society and render them incapable of responding to rational and religious issues. This path is one where they are content only with the literal meanings of Qur'anic verses and Prophetic traditions; the path of non-recognition of philosophy, mysticism {`irfan} and philosophical-scholastic {kalamī} proofs; and heedlessness to the new sciences.

The truth must be accepted, however, that in every epoch, the Qur'an is loftier than human thought.

Therefore, one should not be content with its literal meaning and interpret its probabilities because human mind and thought advance every day and discover new realities. As this Wahhabi idea can become a pretext for neglecting the Qur'an since they consider the human mind as incapable of understanding it and therefore, this book of revelation would end up only being kissed and set aside. One must rather strive as much as possible to understand it properly.