

Detailed Discourse Decisive Ambiguous Verses

A Detailed Discourse About Decisive & Ambiguous Verses & Interpretation



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Al-Mizan, Vol. 5, Under Commentary of Surah 'Aali-'Imran: Verses 7 – 9

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Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i

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What we have explained above about the meaning of decisive and ambiguous verses¹, as well as their “interpretation”, is what one understands after deep consideration of the Qur'anic verses and the traditions of our Imams.

But the Muslims have entangled themselves in sharp controversies about every aspect of these subjects right from the early days; and divergent views have been quoted regarding every detail even from the companions of the Prophet and their disciples. And in all this confusing polemics, not a single explanation conforms with ours; we may say that none of them even superficially resembles it.

The main cause of this conflict is the confusion which exists about the subject matter – they have mixed

the discussion of decisive and ambiguous verses with that of interpretation. As a result, they are in a muddle concerning the issues to be decided; there is disorderliness in their ways of arguments and they are confused about the conclusions drawn from their discourses. We propose to give a systematic analysis of all their opinions under different headings.

1. The Decisive And The Ambiguous Verses

“al-Ihkam” (الْأَحْكَامُ = to make precise, to conform, to make decisive, to strengthen) and “at-tashabuh” (التَّشَابُهْ = conformity of one thing with other, ambiguity) are commonly used words with clear meanings. Allah has attributed these adjectives and verbs to the whole Book:

“(This is) a Book whose verses were confirmed...” (11:1)

“...a Book conforming (in its various parts), oft-repeated...” (39:23).

These verses point to the fact that the whole Book has a forceful eloquence, and a well-integrated style, and that its various parts conform with each other in structural elegance and elocutionary beauty – and its every word leads to sublime realities.

But when we look at the verse,

“He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book, of it there are some verses decisive, they are the basis of the Book, and others are ambiguous...” (3:7).

We know that the adjectives, “al-muhkamat” (الْمُحْكَمَاتُ = confirmed, decisive) and “al-mutashabihat” (الْمُتَشَابِهَاتُ = conforming, ambiguous), as used in this verse, mean something different from the earlier mentioned two verses. Why? Because this verse divides the verses in two categories and then says that only one is “decisive” and the other is “ambiguous”. These words in this verse cannot have the same meanings which were applicable to the whole Book.

The exegetes should have endeavoured to find out from the Qur’anic verses themselves which meanings could be applied in this case. Instead, various people have interpreted them, according to their own thinking, in more than fifteen ways:

First: The decisive are the three verses in Chapter 6 (Cattle):

“Say: Come I will recite what your Lord has forbidden to you-- (remember) that you do not associate anything with Him and show kindness to your parents, and do not slay your children for (fear of) poverty-- We provide for you and for them-- and do not draw nigh to indecencies, those of them which are apparent and those which are concealed, and do not kill the soul which Allah has forbidden except for the requirements of justice; this He has enjoined you with that you may understand” (6: 151).

“And do not approach the property of the orphan except in the best manner until he attains his maturity, and give full measure and weight with justice-- We do not impose on any soul a duty except to the extent of its ability; and when you speak, then be just though it be (against) a relative, and fulfil Allah's covenant; this He has enjoined you with that you may be mindful” (6: 152).

“And (know) that this is My path, the right one therefore follow it, and follow not (other) ways, for they will lead you away from His way; this He has enjoined you with that you may guard (against evil)” (6: 153).

And the ambiguous are those parts that confused the Jews, and they are the “letter symbols” revealed at the beginning of many Qur’anic chapters, like Alif lam mim ra, Ha mim, etc. As it happened, the Jews tried to interpret them in the light of their numerical values, and they thought that Alif lam mim hinted that the Muslim nation would continue for only 71 (1 +30 +40) years. Then other “letter symbols” were revealed, and the Jews became confused.

This opinion has been attributed to Ibn ‘Abbas, a companion of the Prophet (S).

Comment: First, it is an opinion without any proof or evidence. Second, there is no evidence that decisive and ambiguous verses are only those three and the letter symbols respectively. Third, if we accept this view, then almost the whole Qur’an – except those three verses and the letter symbols – would fall in a third category “non–decisive, non–ambiguous”; but the verse clearly divides the whole Book in two categories only.

The fact is that attribution of this view to Ibn ‘Abbas is out of place. According to the narration, he had said that the three verses were decisive – he had not said that the decisive verses were only these three. It is reported in Ad–Durr Al–Manthur from Sa‘id Ibn Mansur, Ibn Abi Hatim, al–Hakim (who said that the tradition was correct) and Ibn Marduwayh that ‘Abdullah Ibn Qays said: “I heard Ibn ‘Abbas saying about the words of Allah: of it there are some verses decisive; he said: three verses at the end of the Chapter of the Cattle are decisive: Say: ‘Come...’ and two following verses.”

That he mentioned these verses just as an example, is supported by another tradition narrated from him by the same author – that explaining the words of Allah, “verses decisive”, he said: “From here, Say: ‘Come...’ up to three verses, and from here, “And your Lord has commanded that you shall not worship (any) but Him...” up to three verses² “.

Both traditions clearly show that he mentioned these verses as examples of decisive verses; not that the decisive verses were only these.

Second: Opposite of the first view: The decisive are the letter symbols at the beginning of various chapters; and ambiguous are all the other verses.

It has been attributed to Abu Fakhitah; he said about the words of Allah, they are the basis of the Book, that they are the opening words of the chapters; the Qur'an is composed from them:

“Alif lam mim” (2:1). “This Book, there is no doubt in it” (2:2). The Chapter of the Cow is composed from them: ***“Alif lam mim” (3:1). “Allah is He besides Whom there is no god” (3:2).*** The Chapter of the Family of ‘Imran is composed from them.

A similar interpretation is reported from Sa‘id Ibn Jubayr, about the words: they are the basis of the Book. He said: “The basis of the Book, because they are written in all the books.”

It appears that, according to Abu Fakhitah and Sa‘id Ibn Jubayr, the letter symbols at the beginning of the chapters are just that – the symbols of the alphabets; and that by putting them in the beginning, Allah has drawn the attention of the hearers to the fact that this Book, which is revealed to you, is made up of these alphabets from which words and sentences are made, and yet no one can bring a like of it.

It is one of the views about the significance of the letter symbols.

Comment: First, it is based on a premise (the supposed significance of the letter symbols) which itself is without any proof or evidence. Second, it is not in conformity with the verse under discussion. According to this interpretation the whole Qur'an, other than the letter symbols, is “ambiguous”; and Allah has in this verse condemned those who follow the ambiguous verses, and has said that it results from perversity of their hearts; it means that one should not follow any verse of the Qur'an, except the letter symbols – and there is nothing to follow in those symbols! On the other hand, Allah praises those who follow the Qur'an; in fact, to follow it is the most important obligation. For example, He says:

“...and follow the light which has been sent down with him, these it is that are the successful” (7:157).

Third: Ambiguous means unspecified, indistinct, vague verses, and decisive are the specified and clear ones.

Comment: The particulars mentioned in the verse, about the decisive and ambiguous verses, do not fit this interpretation.

A word is called vague and indistinct, when various aspects of its meaning are mixed together and it is difficult to disentangle them and to know which one is really intended. Such a word is not acted upon unless it is joined by another clarifying word which makes its meaning clear, and then it is acted upon and followed.

It must be noted here that, in the above-mentioned case, what is followed is the same previously indistinct and vague word as clarified by the distinct and clear one. The clarifying word, in itself, is not followed.

Therefore, if ambiguous means the vague and indistinct verse and decisive is the distinct and clear one, then it is the ambiguous verse that should be followed when clarified by the decisive one – and not the decisive verse itself. Accordingly, to follow an ambiguous verse should not invite condemnation and should not be associated with perversity of heart.

And coming to the practical side, no one – neither those whose hearts are perverted nor those who are firmly rooted in knowledge – follows a vague word unless it is clarified. But Allah condemns the former for following ambiguous verses. It means that ambiguous verses are not vague.

Fourth: Ambiguous are those verses which were abrogated; one believes in them but does not act upon them. Decisive are the verses that abrogated the former, because they are believed in and acted upon.

This opinion has been ascribed to Ibn ‘Abbas, Ibn Mas‘ud and some other companions. And that is why Ibn ‘Abbas used to say that he knew the interpretation of the Qur’an.

Comment: First, even if we accept this explanation as correct, there is no proof that only the abrogated verses are ambiguous. The description that some people follow the ambiguous verses to mislead the people and to interpret them in their own way, is true about a lot of unabrogated verses too, like the ones about the attributes and actions of Allah. Second, this explanation leaves a majority of the verses unaccounted for – those that neither abrogated any, nor were abrogated by any. Was there a third category, which Allah did not mention?

And so far as the view of Ibn ‘Abbas is concerned, it is known that his explanation of decisive and ambiguous verses was more comprehensive, and that he mentioned these two types – abrogated ones and those that abrogate – just as examples. It is quoted in Ad-Durr Al-Manthur from Ibn Jarir, Ibnu ‘1-Mundhir and Ibn Abi Hatim, through the chain of ‘Ali, from Ibn ‘Abbas that he said: “The decisive verses are the ones that abrogated other verses, contain the lawful and unlawful, describe the limits and duties, and (in short) those which are believed in (and acted upon); and the ambiguous are the ones that are abrogated, in which there is some juxtaposition, the parables, the oaths, and that which is believed in but not acted upon.”

Fifth: Decisive are those verses whose proof is clear and evident, like the proofs of Oneness of Allah, and of His power and wisdom. And ambiguous are those which require thinking and consideration.

Comment: What is the meaning of a verse having clear and evident proof? Does it mean that the main idea of a verse should have a rational and self-evident proof? If so, then all verses containing the laws or explaining the duties would become ambiguous, because not a single such law has a self-evident rational proof. Consequently, acting upon the verses containing the rules of the Shari‘ah would be condemnable!

And Islam says that they must be followed and acted upon! Or does it mean that the idea of a verse should have a clear proof from the Book itself? If so, then all the verses do have this quality. And why

not? After all, it is a Book, conforming in its various parts, oft repeated, a light, a clear discourse. So, according to this interpretation, all the verses would be decisive, and there would remain no ambiguous one. But the Qur'an says that some of its verses are ambiguous.

Sixth: Decisive is everything that can be known with the help of a clear or hidden proof; and ambiguous is that which cannot be known in any way, like the time of resurrection.

Comment: Being decisive or ambiguous are the characteristics of the verses of the Book. The Arabic name of a verse is al-ayah (الآية = sign), because it shows a reality from the Divine realities. Whatever is described by a Qur'anic verse cannot be said, by any stretch of imagination, to be "unknowable"; nor is it incomprehensible – it may surely be correctly understood either by itself or with the help of other verses. How can it be said that a verse intends to say something but its words fail to convey the intended meaning? Allah has described His Book as the guidance, the light and the clarification; and that even unbelievers could comprehend it – let alone the believers:

"A revelation from the Beneficent, the Merciful Allah" (41:2).

"A Book of which the verses are made plain, an Arabic Qur'an for a people who know" (41:3).

"A herald of good news and a warner but most of them turn aside so they hear not" (41:4).

"Do they not then meditate on the Qur'an? And if it were from any other than Allah, they would have found in it many a discrepancy" (4:82).

Obviously, no subject matter dealt with in the Qur'an is incomprehensible or unknowable. And what cannot be known, like the time of resurrection and other secrets of the unseen, has not been touched by any verse. So, how can any verse be called ambiguous in the suggested meaning?

In fact, this explanation confuses between the meanings of "ambiguous" and "final interpretation", (the true significance of which has already been described by us in the beginning).

Seventh: Decisive are the verses containing the laws and the Shari'ah; and ambiguous are the other verses, some of which affects the others.

This opinion has been attributed to Mujahid among others.

Comment: This interpretation is wrong in both ways: Apparently "affecting each other" means helping in fixation of the intended meaning, as a. specifying word qualifies a general one; or as a context pin-points the idea conveyed. If so, then even the verses containing the laws should be counted as ambiguous, because they too are subject to this inter- action.

On the other hand, this interpretation gives an impression about the basic characteristic of a decisive verse: That there is no vagueness in its meaning; it distinctly points to its intended idea; that its import is

known by itself, while others' sense is understood by its help. If it is so, and if it is accepted that only the verses containing the laws are decisive, then nothing of the Qur'anic knowledge and realities (except the rules of the Shari'ah) can be known; there is supposedly no decisive verse in that group and, therefore, those verses cannot be referred to any decisive one, and consequently, their substance would remain unknowable for ever.

Eighth: Decisive is the verse that cannot be interpreted except in one way; ambiguous is the one that may be interpreted in more than one way.

It has been ascribed to ash-Shafi'i. Probably, he means that the decisive verse "apparently" has only one meaning; and the ambiguous has more than one "apparent" meaning.

Comment: This "explanation" just changes one word with another: "decisive" has been changed to "one having only one meaning", and "ambiguous" to "one having more than one meaning".

Apart from that in his view, at-ta'wil (interpretation) signifies the meaning of the word; and, as we have earlier explained, it is not correct. If "interpretation" is the same thing as the meaning of a word, then its knowledge could not be restricted to Allah, (or to Allah and those firmly rooted in knowledge). We know that the verses of the Qur'an explain the meanings of each other; and believers and unbelievers; those firmly rooted in knowledge and those in whose hearts is perversity – all equally understand this meaning.

Ninth: Decisive are those verses which have been confirmed and in which the news of the prophets and their peoples has been given in detail; and those "conforming to each other" are those stories that have been repeatedly mentioned in various chapters and whose words conform to each other.

According to this interpretation, the two categories – decisive and ambiguous – are confined to the stories only.

Comment: First, there is no proof that the Qur'anic division is confined to the verses of the stories. Second, the given characteristics of decisive and ambiguous verses – that those who follow the ambiguous do so to mislead the people and to give the verse their own interpretation; and that following the decisive verse has no such defect – do not agree with this explanation. These characteristics are found in other verses as much as in stories, and in once narrated story (like instituting the khilafah in the earth) as well as in oft-repeated ones.

Tenth: Ambiguous is that verse which needs explanation; decisive one does not need it. This view is ascribed to Ahmad Ibn Hanbal.

Comment: The verse containing the Shari'ah need to be explained by the Prophet, although they are certainly among the decisive ones. On the other hand, the abrogated verses are among the ambiguous ones (as was described earlier), and they do not need any explanation (because they are not acted upon), even though in all other respects they are like any other verse of the Shari'ah.

The suggested meaning is, therefore, neither all-inclusive nor exclusive.

Eleventh: Decisive is the verse that is believed in and acted upon; and ambiguous is believed in but not acted upon.

It has been attributed to Ibn Taymiyyah. Perhaps, he wanted to say that the stories and information were ambiguous, and those containing the laws were decisive. If this is the idea behind this explanation, then it could be counted as a separate view; otherwise, it could be fitted to many of the previously mentioned opinions.

Comment: It would mean that all verses, other than those concerning the Shari‘ah, would be ambiguous. In other words, it would be impossible to have knowledge of any Divine reality or any spiritual fact mentioned in the Qur’an (other than the matters of law) because there would be no decisive verse in that group to which the rest of it could be referred.

On the other hand, abrogated verses are concerned with the Shari‘ah, but certainly they are not decisive.

Apparently, he looked at the words,

“... those in whose hearts there is perversity, they follow the part of it which is ambiguous” (3:7), and *“those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say: ‘We believe in it, it is all from our Lord’” (3:7);* and then paraphrased it in these words that decisive verses are believed in and acted upon while ambiguous ones are believed in but not acted upon. He did not realize that this believing in and following, or only believing without following, expresses the duty of the believer ‘after’ he has distinguished between the decisive and ambiguous verses. In other words, it is not the criterion by which one may know the decisive verses from the ambiguous; there must be some other test to distinguish between the two categories.

Twelfth: Ambiguous are those verses which describe the attributes, whether of Allah, for example, All-knowing, Powerful, Wise and All-aware, or of His prophets, for example, the verse about ‘Isa (‘a):

“...and His Word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a Spirit (proceeding) from Him...” (4:171).

And other verses of this type.

It too has been attributed to Ibn Taymiyyah.

Comment: Accepted that the verses of attributes are ambiguous; but there is no evidence that ambiguous verses are confined to only those.

He has written a long passage from which it appears that he takes these two terms in their literal meaning. A gist of his discourse is as follows:

“Decisive is the verse whose meaning is distinct; ambiguous is the one which has two or more possible meanings. The two concepts are relative: may be a verse is ambiguous for an ordinary man, and distinct and decisive for a more knowledgeable one. This relativity manifests itself very clearly in the verses of attributes. Most of the people fail to understand their significance. Their comprehension does not go beyond the limits of the matter. They interpret the Divine Attributes – knowledge, power, sight, hearing, pleasure, displeasure, hand, eye and other such expressions – in material terms, or in wrong ways. Thus, people are misled, wrong beliefs and practices crop up and various schools of thoughts come into being.

“So this is the meaning of decisive and ambiguous. Both are within the purview of human knowledge. What cannot be known is the interpretation of ambiguous verses, that is, the reality that is hidden behind such verses. Let us say that we know the meaning of the words of Allah: Most surely Allah has power over everything, and Most surely Allah knows everything. Still, we do not know the reality of His power and knowledge. The same is true about all Divine Attributes and actions. It is this final interpretation of the ambiguous verses which no one knows except Allah.”

We shall comment on it when discussing the subject of “interpretation”.

Thirteenth: Decisive is what can be reached by the understanding; ambiguous is opposite to it.

Comment: First, it is an opinion that is not supported by any proof. Second, it is correct that the Qur’anic verses may be divided in this way; but this division is totally different from that which groups the verses in two categories of decisive and ambiguous. The characteristics of decisive and ambiguous do not fit to the two sides of this division. Third, it is not all inclusive; the verses of the Shari’ah are surely decisive, and human understanding has no way to reach them.

Fourteenth: Ambiguous is a verse whose interpretation is against the apparent meaning of its words. Decisive is opposite to it; its interpretation is the same as its apparent meaning. This is the view popular among the later scholars; and they use the word *at-ta’wil* for an interpretation that is against the apparent meaning of the words.

Perhaps, the same was meant by the scholar who said: Decisive is that verse whose interpretation is the same as its revelation, and ambiguous is the one that cannot be comprehended except through interpretation.

Comment: It is a new terminology and the given characteristics of decisive and ambiguous verses do not agree with it.

Ambiguous is an expression that is capable of more than one meaning; but only one of those meanings is intended. And that intended meaning is not its “interpretation”. The interpretation, as explained earlier, is a common factor of all the Qur’anic verses, the decisive and the ambiguous alike.

Moreover, there is not a single verse in the Qur'an whose connotation is against its apparent meaning. A few verses that give such impression, are governed by the decisive verses – and the Qur'anic verses explain each other. Obviously, a meaning based on context and associations cannot be said to be against the apparent meaning; and especially when the Speaker Himself declares beforehand that various parts of His speech are all related to each other and should be understood with each other's help, and that no difference can be found in it if one ponders over it:

“Do they not then meditate on the Qur'an? And if it were from any other than Allah, they would have found in it many a discrepancy” (4:82).

Fifteenth: If there is unanimity about the interpretation of a verse, then it is decisive; otherwise, it is ambiguous.

This opinion is ascribed to al-Asamm. Perhaps, what he says may be expressed in other words: There is no difference of opinion as to what a decisive verse means; while there is always such a difference about an ambiguous one.

Comment: If that be the criterion, then the whole Qur'an would become ambiguous, contrary to the division mentioned in this verse. Not a single verse is free from controversy; there is always some difference either about its word or its meaning; always some disagreement whether its apparent meaning is intended. This has led some people to say that the whole Qur'an is ambiguous; and he offers the verse: ***“...a Book conforming in its various parts” (39:23)***, as his proof. He seems oblivious of the inherent contradiction in this reasoning: This argument means that at least this verse is decisive so that it may be relied upon, while he wants to prove from it that not a single verse is decisive!

Some others, believing that the whole Qur'an was ambiguous, said that the apparent meanings of the Qur'an are not a proof at all.

Sixteenth: Ambiguous is the verse that is difficult to explain, because it resembles another verse – the difficulty may arise because of the word or because of the meaning.

It is the opinion of al-Raghib. He has written in Mufradatu 'l-Qur'an:

“Ambiguous verses of the Qur'an are those that are difficult to explain because of their resemblance to other verses – it is either in word or in meaning. The religious scholars have said: ‘The ambiguous is the verse whose apparent meaning does not indicate its real connotation.’ The fact is that the verses, when compared to each other, are of three kinds: The decisive, the ambiguous, and that which is decisive in some respects and ambiguous in others.

“The ambiguous, in all, is of three kinds: ambiguous in word, ambiguous in meaning, and ambiguous in word and meaning both.

“The ambiguous in word is of two kinds: Where ambiguousness is caused by one word – it is not a

commonly used word, like al-abb (أَبُّ = herbage) and yaziffun (يَزِفُونَ = they are hastening); or has more than one meaning, like al-yad (يَدٌ = hand, power) and al-‘ayn (أَعْيُنٌ = eye, sun, supervision) – and where ambiguousness results from the structure of the sentence. This may happen in one of the three ways: when some explanatory words are omitted for the sake of brevity, for example:

“And if you fear that you cannot act equitably towards orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two and three and four” (4:3).

“When some words are added into the sentence for some reason, for example: There is nothing like the likeness of Him” (42: 11).

It would have been easier to understand for a common man if it were said, ‘there is nothing like Him’; and when a word is transferred from its usual place for rhyming or other reasons, for example:

“...Who revealed the Book to His servant and did not make in it any crookedness” (18: 1).

“Rightly directing...” (18:2).

The word, ‘Rightly directing’ describes the state of “the Book” and should have come soon after it; another example:

“...and were it not for believing men and believing women...had they been widely separated...” (48:25).

“And the ambiguous according to meaning are the attributes of Allah and details of the Day of Resurrection. These things are beyond the limit of our imagination – we cannot imagine a thing that is not perceived by us, or does not resemble any such perceived thing, at least.

“And the ambiguous in word and meaning both is of five kinds: First, the ambiguity, because of quantity; when it is arguable whether the word is used in its general or particular meaning, for example, “kill the polytheists”. Second, the ambiguity because of quality; whether the given order is obligatory or recommended, for example, “then marry such woman as seem good to you”. Third, the ambiguity because of time, when it is arguable which of the two given orders is abrogated and which one abrogated it. Forth, ambiguity because of the place and the incident about which the verse was revealed, for example:

“And it is not righteousness that you should enter the houses from their backs...” (2: 189).

“And Postponing (of the sacred month) is only an addition in unbelief” (9:37).

It is difficult for a man who does not know the pre-Islamic Arabs’ customs to understand these references. Fifth, ambiguity because of the conditions that make an action valid or void, for example, the conditions of prayer and marriage.

“If you ponder on these divisions, you will see that all that the exegetes have written or said concerning the meaning of the ‘ambiguous’, comes under one or the other of its headings and sub-headings; for example, the saying that ambiguous are the letter symbols, or Qatadah’s opinion that the ambiguous is the abrogated verse, and the decisive is that which abrogated it, and the view of al-Asamm that there is unanimity about the interpretation of decisive verses, while there is no such unanimity about ambiguous ones.

“Then all the ambiguous verses – whatever the reasons of their ambiguity – are of three categories: First, that which cannot be known by anyone in any way, like the time of resurrection, the appearance of the walker of the earth, and what that walker is, etc. Second, that which may be understood by man, like the uncommon words and complicated syntax. Third, that which may be comprehended by some of those who are firmly rooted in knowledge, and may remain hidden from others. It is this third category, about which the Prophet prayed for ‘Ali (may Allah be pleased with him), ‘O Allah! give him the knowledge of religion and teach him the “interpretation”’; and prayed like this for Ibn ‘Abbas too.”

This was the opinion of ar-Raghib; it is the most comprehensive of all such views; and combines many of the previously mentioned opinions.

Comment: First, it is against the obvious meaning of the verse to say that “ambiguousness” includes such cases as the uncommon words, complicated sentence-structure, generality and particularity of expressions etc. The verse says that the ambiguous verses may be understood by referring them to the decisive ones. But the above-mentioned word problems cannot be solved by the decisive verses; there are other methods to solve them, like the grammar, dictionary etc.

Moreover, the verse says that those who follow the ambiguous verses do so to misguide and to interpret them in their own ways. But nobody follows a general word without knowing its particulars, or an uncommon word without ascertaining from the dictionary what it means. If anyone did so, people would not listen to him, because it would be against the universally accepted principles of language; and, as no one would listen to him, there could be no misleading and no misinterpreting.

Second, his final division of the ambiguous into three categories – that which can be understood by common man, that which cannot be understood, and that which can be understood by some and not by others – shows that he thinks that “interpretation” is a peculiarity of ambiguous verses. But we have already explained that “interpretation” is common to both ambiguous and decisive ones.

These were the opinions of the scholars about the meanings of the decisive and ambiguous verses. As you have seen, none of them is free from defects, nor does any conform with the clear purport of the verse. What one understands from the verse is this: An ambiguous verse is capable of more than one meaning, but the more apparent meaning is doubtful – not because of any difficulty of language or syntax (which can easily be removed with the help of well-recognised literary and linguistic methods), but because it is against the semantic value of a decisive verse. Therefore, the actually intended

meaning may be ascertained only with the help of that decisive verse.

Obviously, the apparent meaning of an ambiguous verse should be familiar to the common people and the simple minds would readily accept it and believe in it. Or if both meanings require some explanation, then the explanation leading to unintended meaning would be easier to understand for an uninitiated and unlearned man.

Look at the innovations and wrong sectarian beliefs; study the never-ending schisms that have been shattering the Muslim community since the moment the Prophet left this world; try to find out the basic cause of their differences in matters of belief and law – and you will see that most of them have resulted from following the ambiguous verses and from interpreting them in a way not approved by Allah.

Every sect proves its beliefs from the Qur'anic verses: A party finds in it evidence that Allah is a body; a group proves from it that man has no free will concerning his actions, while another faction tries to show that man is totally independent of Allah in this respect; some people argue that the prophets committed mistakes and sins, and they quote the verses in their support; a circle says and proves it from the Qur'an, that Allah is so sublime that even "Divine Attributes" should not be attributed to Him, while another faction says, and proves it too from the Qur'an, that Allah is just like His creatures and His attributes are separate from His Person. And so on and so forth. All this is a result of following the ambiguous verses without "returning" them to the relevant decisive ones.

Then look at a group saying that the laws of the Shari'ah were ordained to serve as a path to reach the goal; if one finds a shorter route that leads to the same destination, it would be obligatory to walk on this new route, because the main thing is to reach there, through any easy way. Another one says that the rules of the Shari'ah were promulgated to lead the man to perfection; there is no justification of burdening a man with them after he has reached that goal – therefore, one who has attained perfection is not obliged to observe the rules of the Shari'ah.

All the rules of the Shari'ah, all the religious obligations, the complete penal code and all Islamic policies were established and enforced in the days of the Prophet, not a single item was neglected or kept in abeyance. Then, after his departure, the Muslim governments began suspending law after law. It was a continual process. Whenever a law or a penalty was discarded, those who were responsible for it argued: The religion was sent down for the good of the world and the good of the man; what we have adopted now, in place of the old outmoded law, is far better for the people. Now, we have reached a stage where it is said: The only purpose of the Shari'ah was to make the world a good place to live in; the world, nowadays, is not in a mood to accept the policies and punishments prescribed by Islam – it cannot digest it; the advanced civilization demands advanced and civilized laws – the laws of Islam are not good for this stage.

Also, it is said: The religious rites were established so that they might purify the hearts and lead the minds to correct perception; those hearts that have been well-trained by the society and those spirits

that are solely devoted to the service of mankind, do not need such purifications as ablution, obligatory bath, prayer and fast etc.

Ponder over such views – and their number is beyond counting – and then study the words of Allah, “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”, and you will have to admit that all those disorders and calamities that befell Islam and the Muslims, have emanated from only one source – following the ambiguous verses seeking to give them one’s own interpretation.

That is the reason – and Allah knows better – why the Qur’an has used such a tough language in this respect, most strictly forbidding the Muslims to follow the ambiguous verses seeking to mislead the people, and to interpret them according to one’s own liking; and why it has condemned the tendency of distorting the signs and words of Allah, explaining them without true knowledge, and following the footsteps of Satan. It is the usual practice of the Qur’an to put greatest emphasis on condemning those matters that were likely to destroy any fundamental part of the religion, which, in its turn, could lead to ruination of the whole structure.

Look, for example, at the severest admonitions against befriending the unbelievers; about the love of the near relatives of the Prophet; for staying of the wives of the Prophet inside their houses; against the interest; and concerning the unity in the word of religion etc.

What is the basic source of perversity of heart and of the tendency to mislead the people? It happens when one is inclined towards this material world, loves to remain on the earth for ever and succumbs to desires. How can the rust of perversity be removed? How can the door of misdirection be closed shut? The only way is to remember the Day of Reckoning, as Allah says:

“(as for) those who go astray from the path of Allah, for them surely is a severe punishment because they forgot the Day of Reckoning” (38:26).

That is why those who are firmly rooted in knowledge and who do not wish to interpret the Qur’an in a way their Lord does not approve, point to this fact at the end of their prayer: “Our Lord! Surely Thou art the Gatherer of men on a day about which there is no doubt; surely Allah fails not (His) promise.”

2. “The Decisive Verses Are The Basis Of The Book” What Does It Mean?

A group says: The decisive verses are the basis of the Book – it means that they are the foundation of the Book upon which the edifice of religion, its principles and laws, are built up; and religion is only a collection of beliefs and deeds. Therefore, such verses are believed in and acted upon. So far as the ambiguous verses are concerned, they are believed in but not acted upon, because their meanings are not distinct and their connotations are vague.

Comment: This meaning necessarily emanates from some of the opinions about the meaning of the decisive and ambiguous verses. If one believes that ambiguous is the verse whose interpretation is difficult to comprehend, or that its ambiguousness may be removed totally or partially with the help of reason, grammar, dictionary or other means used to solve a word–problem, then he would have to explain the “basis of the Book” in the way written above.

Others say that the sentence, “Decisive verses are the basis of the Book”, refers to the fact that ambiguous verses return, that is, are referred, to them. But what is the meaning of this “return” or reference? Some people say: It means that ambiguous verses should be believed in, but when it comes to action, only the relevant decisive verse should be followed. For example, an abrogated verse should be believed in, but at the time of action it should be returned to its relevant decisive verse, that is, the one that abrogated it.

Comment: This explanation is not very different from the first one.

There is a third explanation and it is the correct one: The decisive verses are the basis of the Book, inasmuch as they clarify and explain the ambiguous ones and remove their ambiguousness.

As explained in the Commentary, “al-umm” (الْأُمَّ = translated here as “basis”) literary means a thing to which another thing returns. The word “basis” or foundation does not convey the full sense of this word. The first explanation interprets it merely as the foundation; but it does not explain its full import. The word al-umm points to a special kind of return – as a part– returns to its whole, or a branch returns to its roots; the thing that returns is derived from, and is a part of, the thing to which it returns. This word, therefore, indicates that ambiguous verses have such meanings that branch out from, and return to, the decisive ones. And that is why the decisive ones explain and clarify the ambiguous ones.

Moreover, the ambiguous is given this name because it is capable of more than one meaning; and not because it has an “interpretation” – interpretation is found in decisive verses also; the Qur’anic verses explain each other, and it is only decisive verses that can clarify the ambiguous ones. Let us repeat the example of the verse: **“Looking to their Lord” (75:23)**; it is ambiguous; but when it is returned to the words of Allah:

“nothing is like a likeness of Him” (42: 11).

“Visions comprehend Him not” (6: 103).

It becomes clear that “looking at” in this phrase means something different from the optical vision connected with the eyes. Likewise, Allah has said:

“The (Prophet’s) heart belied not what he saw” (53: 11).

“What! do you then dispute with him as to what he saw?” (53: 12).

“Certainly, he saw of the greatest signs of his Lord” (53: 18).

The verses prove that the heart has a sight of its own. And this vision of heart is something different from “thinking” and “consideration”. Because the thought and consideration is a process that consists of a subject and a predicate; while vision is a single action, it looks at the object without joining it to any subject or predicate. Therefore, this vision of heart is neither a material nor a mental consideration; it is the orientation of heart towards the object.

The same is the case with all other ambiguous verses.

3. The Meaning Of “At-Ta’wil”

According to some exegetes at-ta’wil (interpretation) is synonymous for exegesis, explanation or meaning of the sentence. Meanings of some parts of the Qur’an are certainly known to the people. Accordingly, the interpretation mentioned in the verse (seeking to give it their own interpretation, but none knows its interpretation except Allah) must be restricted to the meaning of the ambiguous verses. Therefore, they say that none can know, in any way, the meaning of an ambiguous verse, except Allah – or except Allah and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge.

Another group says that “interpretation” is the meaning that is against the apparent meaning of the word. This explanation has become so wide spread that, at present, it has become the real meaning of at-ta’wil, while originally this word meant “to return” or “the returning place”. Anyhow, this explanation is popular among the later exegetes, while the first-mentioned explanation was familiar to the ancients, whether they believed that its knowledge was restricted to Allah only, or said that they too, who were firmly rooted in knowledge, knew it; for example, it has been narrated from Ibn ‘Abbas that he used to say: “I am one of those who are firmly rooted in knowledge and I know its interpretation.”

A third group says: “Interpretation” is that meaning of the verse which is not known except to Allah (or to Allah and the ones firmly rooted in knowledge), and which is against the apparent meaning of the word. In other words, an ambiguous verse has many meanings – one behind the other; some meanings are showing themselves just behind the words, and may be perceived by one and all; others are far behind and none knows them except Allah (or except Allah and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge).

There is, within this group, a difference of opinion as to how those various meanings are related to the word. It is sure that all of them are not on the same level; otherwise, it would mean that one word is used in more than one meaning at the same time, and that is not permissible in language (as has been explained in the Fundamentals of Jurisprudence). Therefore, those meanings must be taken consecutively. Now comes the difference: Some say that one meaning is the real one; the second is its concomitant; the third is the second’s concomitant and so on. Others say that the meanings are all ranked one behind the other, as an esoteric meaning is hidden behind a manifest one. When a man speaks a word, he intends it to convey its familiar meaning, and with the same intention he aims at its

esoteric meaning. You say: Give me water to drink. You ask only for drink; but that very word is also a demand to satiate your thirst; and this in its turn is a call to satisfy a need of life, and then a determination to acquire the perfection of existence. Note that you had not given four orders; you only told him to give you water to drink, but this one demand contained in itself all the unspoken but intended demands – one inside the other.

There is a fourth explanation: Interpretation is not a sort of a meaning intended from the word. It is a thing really existing outside imagination, upon which the talk is based. If the speech is of imperative mood – enjoining or forbidding – then its interpretation is that reason for which the said commandment is given. There is an order: Establish prayer. Its interpretation is that spiritual perfection which illuminates the soul of the one who prays, and prevents him from evil and sin. If the speech is an information – of a past event – then that event itself is its interpretation. Look, for example, at the verses narrating the stories of the prophets and their peoples. And if it is an information of a present or future happening, then it is of two kinds:

(1) If the subject may be perceived by one of the senses or comprehended by mind, then its interpretation is the same subject as it exists or shall exist in reality: For example, Allah says:

“And among you are those who hearken for their sake” (9:47).

And:

“The Romans are vanquished” (30:2).

“In a near land, and they, after being vanquished, shall overcome” (30:3).

“Within a few years...” (30:4).

(2) If it is a future event of unseen that cannot be perceived by worldly perceptions, nor can it be comprehended by our minds, like the affairs of the Day of Resurrection, the time of its happening, the raising of the dead and their gathering together, the questioning, the reckoning, the flying of the books of deeds etc., and like the reality of the Divine Attributes and Actions. (These latter are above the reach of time and beyond the limit of minds), then too their interpretation is the same reality that exists or shall exist outside imagination.

There is a big difference between the verses that describe these last-mentioned realities (attributes and actions of Allah and the affairs related to the Day of Resurrection) and those describing other subjects. It is possible to know the interpretation of the verses that describe other subjects; but so far as the verses describing the Divine Attributes etc., are concerned, none knows their interpretation except Allah; although those who are firmly rooted in knowledge may be given this knowledge by Allah to the extent of their mental capacities and spiritual perfection. Still, the reality, that is, the full and final interpretation, is not given to any creature at all.

These are the four main opinions concerning the meaning of “interpretation”. There are some other views also; they are, in fact, various branches of the first opinion although those who expressed them have not acknowledged this fact:

1. Exegesis is more general than interpretation. Exegesis is mostly used for explanation of words; interpretation is mostly used for explanation of the meanings and sentences. The term, “interpretation” is generally used only for the Divine Books; while exegesis is used for other books too.
2. Exegesis is explanation of a word that has only one meaning; interpretation is choosing, with help of some rules and reason, one meaning out of several possible ones.
3. Exegesis shows the definite meaning of the word; interpretation chooses one among many possible meanings. (It is not very different from no. 2).
4. Exegesis shows the reason of the meaning; interpretation explains the reality of the meaning. For example, look at the verse: Most surely your Lord is on watch (89: 14). Its exegesis shall be as follows: “al-Mirsad” (الْمِرْصَادُ = watching place) is on paradigm of al-mif‘al (الْمِفْعَالُ) from the verb rasada; yarsudu (يَرْصُدُ ، رَصَدَ = he watched; he is watching). And its interpretation is the warning against slackening in matters of the Shari‘ah and thinking little of the commandments of Allah.
5. Exegesis is a description of the clear meaning of a word; interpretation is the explanation of its difficult meaning.
6. Exegesis is concerned with tradition and narration; interpretation is related to reason.
7. Exegesis is limited to following and listening (what the ancients said); interpretation is concerned with inference and reason.

These seven are in fact various facets of the first opinion; and all objections levelled against that are

valid about these too. Anyhow, one cannot rely on any of the four opinions or their branches.

One defect is common to all: They presume that “interpretation” is the meaning of the verse, or that it is the happening or cause to which the verse refers. But it has been explained in the Commentary that “interpretation” is not the meaning of a verse – it does not matter whether the meaning is the apparent one or is against it. Also, it has been clarified therein that although interpretation is a real event or fact, but not every event – it is that fact with which the word has the same relation as a proverb has with its purpose; or as an exterior has with its interior.

The detailed comments on the four opinions are as follows:

About the first opinion: One who believes it, must also believe that at least some of the Qur’anic verses are unintelligible; that its “interpretation”, that is, exegesis cannot be understood from its words. But there is no such verse in the Qur’an; the Qur’an clearly says that it has been revealed so that an average mind may easily understand it.

A man having this opinion cannot avoid this difficulty except by saying that the only ambiguous verses are the letter–symbols at the beginning of some chapters, as their meanings are not known to the people. But, there is no proof that only the letter–symbols are “ambiguous”; and just because at–ta’wil means to return and at–tafsir (التفسيرُ = exegesis) also has a shade of this meaning in it, it does not follow that both are synonymous – a mother is the returning place for her children, but she is not their “interpretation”; a principal is the returning place of his dependents, but he is not their “interpretation”.

Moreover, according to the verse, one of the characteristics of the ambiguous verses is that perverted persons follow them to mislead the people. But who has ever been misled by letter–symbols? Most of the misguidance in Muslim community has occurred because of following those verses that describe the attributes of Allah and other such things.

About the second opinion: It says that there are verses in the Qur’an whose intended import is against their apparent meanings, and those apparent meanings cause misguidance in religion as they are against the decisive verses. This statement boils down to this: The verses of the Qur’an are contradictory to each other and that contradiction cannot be removed unless some verses are deprived of their open meanings and given some such connotations that, in normal course, would not be understood from them.

This, in its turn, would invalidate the argument contained in the words of Allah:

“Do they not then meditate on the Qur’an? And if it were from any other than Allah, they would have found in it many a discrepancy” (4:82).

If the discrepancy between two verses can be removed only by saying that one or both do not mean what their words apparently say; that they have an interpretation (i.e., a meaning against the apparent

one) that is not known to anyone other than Allah, then the verse 4:82, written above, cannot prove that the Qur'an is from Allah. One can easily remove contradiction and discrepancy from any literary or academic work of any author, if one were to change the apparent meanings of contradictory statements and give them new connotations unknown to any linguist. But such removal of contradiction would not prove that that work is a Divine revelation.

The fact is that every speech – even one that is admittedly false or is just a jumble of words – can be presented as a true fact or a serious discourse if its words were given some hitherto unknown meanings against their clear connotations. But such an absence of discrepancy would not mean that that speech was from a Speaker Who is above the changes, Whose decrees and statements do not contradict each other, Who is not liable to forgetfulness and error, Who is All perfect by Himself and has not acquired perfection through trial and error, experience and passage of time.

The verse 4:82, proves that the Qur'an is understandable to common minds and may be pondered and meditated upon; that no verse of it has a meaning that is against the clear dictate of Arabic language; in short, it does not contain puzzles and riddles.

About the third opinion: No one who has meditated on the Qur'an would deny that the Qur'anic verses have various consecutive connotations – one behind the other. But all those connotations are, in fact, various levels of the meanings of the words – and especially so if we say that they are concomitants of the first meaning. And their understandability varies according to the intelligence levels of the readers. But this idea has no resemblance with at-ta'wil (interpretation).

Remember what Allah has said about the “interpretation” of the Qur'an that none knows it except Allah. And note the fact that one does not need piety and spiritual purity to understand a complicated or deep philosophical discourse; what one requires is a sharp intelligence. Then you will realize that it would be inappropriate to say that only Allah knew the interpretation (in the meaning given in this opinion) of the Qur'an. (It does not mean that piety and spiritual purity do not help in comprehension of Divine knowledge and realities; but they are not the main foundation of this comprehension. This place is reserved for intelligence and scholarship.)

About the fourth opinion: He is right when he says that at-ta'wil (interpretation) is not restricted to the ambiguous verses, it is found in the whole Qur'an. Also, he is right in saying that interpretation is not the meaning of the word; it is a real fact on which the speech is based. But he is wrong when he says that every fact, referred to by the verse, is its interpretation, and when he says, for example, that the past events or the future happenings are the interpretations of the relevant verses. Again, he is wrong in thinking that only the verses describing the Divine Attributes and the events of the Day of Resurrection are ambiguous. Why do we say that he is wrong in these assumptions? The answer is as follows:

What is the meaning of the words: “and seeking to give it (their own) interpretation, but none knows its interpretation except Allah”? Do the pronoun “it” and “its” refer to “the Book”? In other words, does the

verse say that none knows the interpretation of the whole Book except Allah? If the interpretation means real events and causes mentioned in the verses, then the above statement would not be correct, because interpretations (in the meaning just described) of a great many verses are known to many other than Allah and other than those who are firmly rooted in knowledge; in fact, it may be known to even those in whose hearts there is perversity – such are the verses narrating the stories of the past nations and the current events, and even the verses dealing with laws and ethics. Everyone can acquire the knowledge of these things, and no one can fail to understand their interpretation (in this meaning).

Or, do the pronouns, “it” and “its” refer to “the part of the Book that is ambiguous”? If so, then it will be correct to restrict the knowledge of its interpretation to Allah (or to Allah and those firmly rooted in knowledge). And then it would be the import of the verse that none, except Allah (and those firmly rooted in knowledge) should seek to interpret the ambiguous verses; otherwise, the people would be misled and misguided.

But it would be wrong in this case to say that only the verses describing the attributes and actions of Allah, and those connected with the Day of Judgement were ambiguous. Misguidance is caused by misinterpretation of other types of verses too; for example, the verses related to the Shari‘ah and the stories of the prophets and their nations. It has been claimed by a group that the main purpose of the law is to reform and develop the society; if the good of the society depends on a law other than the one ordained by religion, or if that ordained law is no longer suitable for this enlightened era, a new law should be adopted and the religious command should be discarded. Likewise, it has been claimed that the miracles attributed by the Qur’an to the prophets were not supernatural events; they were normal occurrences, which the Qur’an narrated in a way as to put on them a halo of mystery; as a result of this dramatic style, it succeeded in attracting the attention of the audience and to make them submit to what they thought to be a super-power, above all powers. Such misleading explanations and interpretations are found in their hundreds in all the sects that have deviated from true Islam. And all are the result of interpreting the Qur’an according to one’s own liking, seeking to mislead the people. Therefore, it is wrong to say that only those verses are ambiguous which describe the Divine Attributes and the affairs of the Day of Resurrection.

Now, it should be clear that the meaning of “interpretation” given by us in the Commentary is the only true one:

Interpretation is that reality to which a verse refers; it is found in all verses, the decisive and the ambiguous alike; it is not a sort of a meaning of the word; it is a real fact that is too sublime for words; Allah has dressed them with words so as to bring them a bit nearer to our minds; in this respect they are like proverbs that are used to create a picture in the mind and thus help the hearer to clearly grasp the intended idea. That is why Allah has said:

“[I swear] by the Book that makes manifest [the truth]” (43:2).

“Surely We have made it an Arabic Qur’an, so that you may understand” (43:3).

“And surely it is in the original of the Book with Us, truly elevated, full of wisdom” (43:4).

And this thing has been explicitly and implicitly mentioned in several Qur’anic verses.

Moreover, you have seen in the Commentary that whenever the Qur’an uses the word, “interpretation” (and it has been used seventeen times), it intends this very meaning, described by us.

4. Does Anyone, Other Than Allah, Know The “Interpretation” Of The Qur’an

This issue too has caused sharp controversy among the exegetes. The main reason of the controversy is the meaning of “and”, in the sentence, “and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say: We believe in it, it is all from our Lord”. Is it a conjunctive? Or, has it been used only to begin a new sentence?

Some early exegetes, some Shafi’ites and most of the Shi’ites believe that it is a conjunctive; that the verse says that those too who are firmly rooted in knowledge know the interpretation of the ambiguous verses of the Qur’an.

Most of the early exegetes and the Hanafites believe that with this “and” a new sentence begins; that none knows the interpretation of the ambiguous except Allah, Who has kept this knowledge to Himself. Both groups bring in their support a lot of academic explanations and traditions; the polemics goes on, arguments are put forward, are refuted by the opposite group, then the refutations in their turn are refuted; thus, it goes on and on.

Both sides suffer from confusion about the issue to be decided. They have confused the interpretation of the Qur’an with returning the ambiguous verse to the decisive. Therefore, it will be a waste of time and space to quote here their arguments and counter-arguments. So far as the traditions are concerned, they are against the clear meaning of the Qur’an:

1. Let us look, to begin with, at the traditions that say that those who are firmly rooted in knowledge know the interpretation. These traditions use “interpretation” as synonymous for the “intended meaning of the ambiguous”; but, as mentioned repeatedly, interpretation of the Qur’an is something else.

It has been narrated through the Sunni chains that the Prophet prayed for Ibn ‘Abbas: “O Allah! give him knowledge of the religion and teach him the interpretation.” And Ibn ‘Abbas is reported as saying: “I am among those who are firmly rooted in knowledge and I know its interpretation.” Also, he said: “The decisive are the verses that abrogated and the ambiguous are the abrogated ones.” All these traditions put together give an impression that the decisive verse is the interpretation of the ambiguous one.

But we have already explained that this verse is not concerned with this sort of interpretation.

2. Now we come to those traditions that show that knowledge of the interpretation of the ambiguous verses is restricted to Allah:

A) Ibn 'Abbas is reported to recite the verse in this way: "and none knows its interpretation except Allah, and say those who are firmly rooted in knowledge: 'We believe in it...'" The same recitation is ascribed to Ubay Ibn Ka'b. Likewise, Ibn Mas'ud is reported to recite: "And its interpretation is not except with Allah. And those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say: 'We believe in it...'"

But such traditions can prove nothing: First, because such uncommon recitations are of no value at all; secondly, utmost that can be shown from them is that this verse does not prove that those who are firmly rooted in knowledge know the interpretation; but there is a world of difference between not proving that Zayd exists and proving that he does not exist.

B) It is narrated by at-Tabarani from Abu Malik al-Ash'ari that he heard the Messenger of Allah (S) saying: "I am not afraid for my ummah but from three things: that their wealth would increase, and they would envy each other and kill each other; and that the Book would be opened for them, and the believer would take it seeking to interpret it, and none knows its interpretation except Allah; and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say: 'We believe in it, it is all from our Lord'; and none do mind except those having understanding; and that their knowledge would increase and they would waste and neglect it." (Ad-Durr Al-Manthur)

This tradition – if we accept that it has any relation with the subject matter – would only show that common believers did not know the interpretation; but it could not be proved from it that those too who were firmly rooted in knowledge did not have its knowledge. And the controversy is about this latter group; it is not about general believers.

C) Some people offer those traditions as their proof which say that the decisive verses should be followed and ambiguous ones should only be believed in.

But such traditions have no relevance to the issue under dispute.

D) al-Alusi has quoted in his at-Tafsir: al-Marfu' ([3](#)) (الْمَرْفُوعُ) tradition through Ibn Jarir from Ibn 'Abbas that he said: "The Qur'an has been revealed on four words: The lawful, and the prohibited (none is excused from acquiring its knowledge); and the explanation (it is done by the scholars); and the ambiguous, none knows it except Allah, and the one who claims to know it (except Allah) is a liar."

Let us have a cursory glance at this tradition: First, some names from the chain of its narrators are omitted. Secondly, it is against the previously mentioned traditions that say that the Prophet prayed for him to be given the knowledge of interpretation, and against his own claim that he had this knowledge. Thirdly, it is against the clear import of the Qur'an that interpretation is something other than the meaning of the ambiguous.

What is, then, the reply to the question asked in the beginning? Does anyone, other than Allah, know the interpretation of the Qur'an? The answer is: Yes, the Qur'an proves the possibility of the knowledge of its interpretation to someone other than Allah; although this verse does not prove it.

Let us explain the second statement first. The context shows the theme of this verse: It wants to say that the Book is divided in two categories – the decisive and the ambiguous – and also the people are of two types: there is a group which, because of perversity of hearts, seeks to follow the ambiguous verses; and there is another group that is firmly rooted in knowledge and therefore follows the decisive verses and believes in the ambiguous ones. It is clear, in this light, that the phrase, “those who are firmly rooted in knowledge”, is used here primarily to describe their good faith and behaviour vis-a-vis the Qur'an, and to extol their virtue in contrast to those in whose hearts there is perversity. The sentence aims at nothing else. And there is no reason, so far as this verse is concerned, to join those who are firmly rooted in knowledge, with Allah, in knowledge of the Book's interpretation. The arguments put forward in this respect are defective, as we have shown above.

In short, the restriction, “none knows its interpretation except Allah”, remains valid, without any opposing or qualifying clause – there is no conjunction, exception or qualification in this absolute statement. Therefore, so far as this verse is concerned, the knowledge of the Qur'an's interpretation is reserved for Allah.

Nevertheless, there may be other proofs to show that someone, other than Allah, may be knowing this interpretation. There are in the Qur'an instances in which an absolute restriction of one verse has been qualified by another. Take the example of the knowledge of the unseen. The Qur'an has declared in many verses that it is confined to Allah:

“Say: ‘No one in the heavens and the earth knows the unseen but Allah’” (27:65).

“Say: ‘The unseen is only for Allah’” (10:20).

“And with Him are the keys of the unseen – none knows them but He” (6:59).

And after all these restricting statements, comes the following verses:

“The Knower of the unseen! so He does not reveal His secrets to any” (72:26).

“Except to him whom He chooses of an apostle” (72:27).

This verse clearly says that some persons other than Allah, that is, the chosen apostles, are given the knowledge of the unseen.

Now time has come to discuss the first statement: Other verses of the Qur'an prove that it is possible for someone, other than Allah, to have the knowledge of the Qur'an's interpretation:

As repeatedly explained, interpretation is a real fact existing outside imagination, and the meaning of the verse has the same relation with it as a proverb has with its purpose and purport. Interpretation is not the meaning of the verse; rather it transpires through that meaning – a special sort of transpiration. There is a proverb in Arabic used when someone intends to do a work but has already destroyed its means: “In summer you spoiled the milk.” When it is used, its literal meaning (a woman’s spoiling the milk in summer) does not fit the occasion, yet it presents a clear picture before the eyes of the audience, and that picture leads to the purpose of the talk.

The same is the case of the interpretation. There is a spiritual reality which is the main objective of ordaining a law, or basic aim of describing a Divine Attribute; there is an actual significance to which a Qur’anic story refers. That spiritual reality or actual significance is not seen in the words or the meaning of the verse – that order, prohibition, explanation, or narration does not mention that spiritual reality or actual significance in its words. But it transpires from that order etc., because the order etc., is founded it. We may as well say that the order or story etc., points to that spiritual reality or significance.

A man tells his servant: “Give me water to drink.” This order emanates from the natural instinct of man to perfect his existence. It is this basic reality that demands preservation of self; this in its turn arranges to replace what is used up in the body; this requires replenishment with food and drink; this need is announced through hunger and thirst; thirst demands satiation, which in its turn causes the man to give that order to his servant. The interpretation of the said order, therefore, is the natural instinct of man to perfect his existence. If this reality, this natural instinct, changes for any reason, the order, “Give me water”, also would change.

Likewise, various societies have some recognized ethical and social norms based on what they think to be good or evil. This in its turn, depends on a set of customs and traditions that are firmly settled in the doer’s mind, through heredity and environment. This compound cause is the interpretation of his action and inaction. If those social factors change for any reason, his action and inaction will also change.

A subject – whether it is an order, a story or any other topic – that has an interpretation will certainly change if that interpretation changes. Now ponder on the words of Allah:

“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” (3:7).

Note that they have been condemned because they try to give that verse their own interpretation which is not the real one; and this misinterpretation causes misguidance and makes people go astray. Had they followed its true interpretation then it could not be condemned. They would have followed truth and reality, it would have led them to the relevant decisive verses, and it would have been a praiseworthy act.

Now it is clear that the interpretations of the Qur’an are the facts actually existing outside imagination;

the Qur'anic verses its spiritual realities, laws and stories – are based upon them; if supposedly any of those facts changes for any reason, the relevant verses would also surely change.

This fits perfectly the purport of the verses:

“[I swear] by the Book that makes manifest [the truth]” (43:2).

“Surely We have made it an Arabic Qur'an, so that you may understand” (43:3).

“And surely it is in the original of the Book with Us, truly elevated, full of wisdom” (43:4).

They show that the Qur'an, when it was with Allah, was too elevated to be comprehended by human understanding; too precise and firm to admit any break or fragmentation. But Allah, because of His mercy, made it into a Book to be recited, and clothed it with Arabic language, so that people may understand what they could not comprehend as long as it was in the original, or basis, of the Book. This original or basis of the Book has been mentioned in these verses:

“Allah effaces what He pleases and establishes (likewise), and with Him is the basis of the Book” (13:39).

“Nay! it is a glorious Qur'an” (85:21).

“In a guarded tablet” (85:22).

And in a general way the following verse also proves it:

“[This is] a Book, whose verses were confirmed [or, made decisive], then they were divided, from one Wise, All-aware” (11:1).

The confirmation and decisiveness refer to its condition when it was with Allah without any fragmentation or break, and the division refers to that state when it was made into chapters and verses and was revealed to the Prophet.

This last condition (division), which is based on the first (confirmation), is mentioned in the verse:

“And a Qur'an which We revealed in portions so that you may read it to the people by slow degrees, and We sent it down [i.e., revealed it] in portions” (17:106).

It is clear that the Qur'an, in its original, was undivided, then it was made into portions and sent down piecemeal and revealed gradually.

The above statement does not mean that the whole Qur'an, when it was with Allah, was arranged in chapters and verses, a sort of a book written and bound, and then it was divided into pieces and sent to the Prophet a little bit at a time, so that he might read to the people by slow degrees, as a teacher

divides a book in portions and teaches the student every day a portion according to his mental capacity. There is a basic difference between revealing the Qur'an to the Prophet in portions and teaching a student a book, piece by piece.

The verses were revealed according to the events that had a bearing on their revelation. But there is no such thing in teaching of a student. Various pieces that are to be taught to a student may be, and are, gathered and put together in a book form beforehand; then the teacher teaches a piece or a portion every day, as he thinks fit. But it cannot be said about many Qur'anic verses, such as the following:

“So, forgive them and pass over them” (5: 13).

“Fight those of the unbelievers who are near to you” (9: 123).

“Allah has surely heard the plea of her who pleads with you about her husband and complains to Allah” (58: 1).

“Take alms out of their wealth, you would cleanse them and purify them thereby” (9: 103).

There are numerous such verses. It is not possible to ignore the reasons and occasions that resulted in their revelation; one cannot arbitrarily say that this or that verse was revealed in the earlier or later days of the Call, discarding the reasons of its revelation. Therefore, it cannot be said that the Qur'an was with Allah in chapters and verses, as we know, it today.

And it shows that the “Qur'an” mentioned in the verse, “And a Qur'an which We revealed in portions”, refers to a Qur'an other than this one which is made of chapters and verses.

What one understands from the above verses, is that there is something, beyond this Qur'an which is read and understood by us. And that “something” has the same relation with this Qur'an as the spirit has with the body, or as the significance of a proverb has with that proverb. It is that spirit of this Qur'an which is called by Allah as:

“The confirmed [or wise] Book” (10: 1).

The Qur'anic teachings and meanings depend upon it. That spirit of the Qur'an is not made of words or words' meanings.

The above-mentioned characteristics of the spirit of the Qur'an are the same as those of the “interpretation” of the Qur'an. The above discourse makes it even clearer; and makes us realize why it is said that the interpretation of the Qur'an cannot be even touched by common minds and unclean spirits. Then Allah says:

“Most surely it is an honoured Qur'an” (56:77).

“In a Book that is hidden” (56:78).

“None do touch it save the purified ones” (56:79).

These verses clearly say that the purified servants of Allah do touch the honoured Book which is hidden and protected from any change; minds cannot reach it, because that also would be a sort of a change. Anyhow, the purified ones do touch it – the only meaning of the words – “touch” in this context is that they know it and understand it. Also, it is known that this hidden Book is the same “basis of the Book” and “original of the Book” mentioned in the verses:

“Allah effaces what He pleases and establishes [likewise], and with Him is the basis of the Book” (13:39).

“And surely it is in the original of the Book with Us, truly elevated, full of wisdom” (43:4).

Those are the people whose heart are purified; and this purification emanates from none other than Allah, because He has attributed this purifying to Himself:

“Allah only desires to keep away the uncleanness from you, O People of the House! and to purify you a [thorough] purifying” (33:33)

“...but He intends to purify you” (5:6).

Wherever in the Qur’an, the spiritual purification is mentioned Allah has attributed it to Himself or to His permission. What is this purity? It is removal of impurity and uncleanness from the heart. What is meant by “heart” in this context? It is the means of perception, understanding and will. The purity of heart, then, is the purity of the soul in knowledge and belief as well as in will. Thus, the heart remains firm in its true beliefs, without any doubt or confusion; and this firmness makes it steadfast in following and acting upon that true belief and knowledge, obeying the commandments of Allah, without deviating to the path of desire, without breaking the covenant of knowledge. Such a man is said to be firmly rooted in knowledge. Because the same are the characteristics, described by Allah, of those who are firmly rooted in knowledge. Allah has praised them that they are rightly guided and steadfastly firm on what they know; that there is no perversity in their hearts and they do not seek to mislead the people. These are the same characteristics as of the purified ones. It means that the purified ones are firmly rooted in knowledge.

But there is a fine distinction that should not be overlooked. What has been proved above is this: The purified ones know the interpretation of the Qur’an; and it is a concomitant of their purity that they are also firmly rooted in knowledge – because that purification is attributed to Allah Who cannot fail in what He intends.

But it does not mean that the knowledge of the Qur’anic interpretation is given to them because of their being firmly rooted in knowledge. In other words, the firmly rooted knowledge is not the cause of their knowledge of the Qur’anic interpretation, because the verse does not prove it; rather it may be inferred

from its context that they were not conversant with that interpretation: **“(they) say: ‘We believe in it, it is all from our Lord’” (3:7)**. Moreover, Allah has praised some of the people of the Book that they were firmly rooted in knowledge, and has extolled them for their acceptance of true faith and good deeds; and still it does not show that they knew the interpretation of the Book. The relevant verse is as follows:

“But those firmly rooted in knowledge among them as well as the believers believe in what has been sent down to you and what has been sent down before you...” (4:162).

Also, it should be noted that the verse: **“None do touch it save the purified ones” (56:79)**, proves only that the purified ones “touch” the hidden Book; in other words, they know the interpretation of the Qur’an to a certain extent. But it does not say that they have comprehensive knowledge of its complete interpretation, or that they are not unacquainted of any portion of its interpretation at any time. The verse is silent on this matter. If it is to be proved, some other evidence should be brought for it.

5. Why The Book Contains The Ambiguous Verses

One of the objections levelled against the Qur’an is the one based on the presence of the ambiguous verses in it. They say: The Muslims claim that whatever the mankind would need for its guidance up to the Day of Resurrection is in the Qur’an; that it is a decisive word that distinguishes between truth and falsehood. And then we see that every group, among the innumerable Muslim sects, relies on the Qur’an to prove the correctness of its beliefs and actions. It would not have been possible if there were no ambiguity in its verses. Had this Book been made clear and kept free from this maze of ambiguous verses, it would have served its purpose in a better way, and there would not have been any chance of controversy and perversity.

The Muslims have variously replied to this objection; some of the replies are patently absurd and foolish. For example:

“The presence of ambiguous verses makes it hard to get to the truth, and entails intense search and research. This makes the true believer eligible to better and greater reward! “

“Had it clearly supported a certain sect, all other sects would have left it unread and unstudied. It is because of the ambiguous verses that all of them look into, and ponder on it; and thus there remains a possibility that they would see the right path and follow it.”

“The ambiguous verses have made it necessary to seek support of one’s views from rational arguments. Thus, these verses take the Muslims out of the darkness of blind following into the light of contemplation and research.”

“The presence of such verses compelled the Muslims to argue about their various interpretations; and this in its turn led them to master various branches of knowledge, like language, conjugation, syntax, and fundamentals of jurisprudence! “

Such replies do not merit any comment. There are three other replies which we append below with our comments:

First: The Qur'an contains ambiguous verses, so that the hearts may be purified by believing in them. Had all the verses been distinct, decisive and clear – about which nobody could have any doubt – believing in them would have not been a meaningful and significant thing; it would have not entailed surrender to the words of Allah and submission to His apostles.

Comment: Submission is the reaction of a weaker person in front of a stronger force. A man surrenders before a thing, the greatness of which he comprehends; or before a thing that is beyond his comprehension, and with whose greatness he is completely overwhelmed; like the power, greatness and other Attributes of Allah – when man tries to understand them, he feels stunned and bewildered.

But why should he submit to a thing which, although beyond his comprehension, seems to him within his grasp? If a man mistakenly believes that he knows the interpretation of an ambiguous verse (although in fact he does not know it), he will never submit himself to it nor will he surrender before its greatness.

Second: Ambiguous verses were revealed to motivate the minds to meditate and research. Had all the verses been distinct there would not have been any need for mental exercise and the power of understanding would have withered away. And understanding is the most precious element of human life; it must be nourished and developed for the sake of human perfection.

Comment: Allah has ordered the man to meditate and ponder on the signs found in the universe and in the man himself – this exhortation is sometimes phrased in general terms and often with reference to particular subjects, like the creation of the heavens, the earth, the mountains, the trees, the animals and the human beings; the difference in colours and languages of mankind etc. He has called him to think and meditate, to walk in the earth and take lesson from the previous nations' affairs. He has forcefully urged them to apply the minds to the wonders of the world and to think hard. And He has extolled knowledge and cognition in the best terms.

Was not all this enough for sharpening the mind and intensifying the intelligence? Was there any further need of sending down ambiguous verses – to trap the minds and ensnare the intellect?

Third: The prophets were sent to all the people – the average ones and the above average, the intelligent and the dull, the learned and the ignorant. Some realities and ideas cannot be explained in plain language. Such subjects must necessarily be described in a language clothed with allegory and metaphor. Only the learned, intelligent and the above average persons will be able to understand it; common people must necessarily be told to believe in it and leave the matter to Allah.

Comment: The Book, according to the verse under discussion, contains some ambiguous verses, and some decisive ones which are the basis of the Book, and which do explain the ambiguous verses when they are returned to them (decisive ones). In other words, the ambiguous verses do not contain any

ideas other than those which may be clarified by the decisive ones. And it leaves the question still unanswered: What is the use of the ambiguous verses when all their meanings are clearly described by the decisive ones?

The exegete, who wrote this reply, seems a bit confused. He has divided the meanings of the Qur'an into two mutually exclusive groups: Meanings that may be understood by one and all (and they are the meanings of the decisive verses), and those that cannot be understood except by some special people (and they are the connotations of the ambiguous ones). If we accept this classification, then the ambiguous verses shall not be returned to the decisive ones – but it is against the clear declarations of the Qur'an that its verses explain each other.

If no reply is free from defect, then what is the answer to the question given in the beginning?

The fact is that the presence of ambiguous verses is necessary in the Qur'an, and it has resulted from the existence of the interpretation. When we use the word, "interpretation", we refer to its true connotation explained under the third heading. Various ambiguous verses, when compared with each other, lead to the said interpretation.

To understand this statement, one should first ponder on the style of the Qur'an, the factors on which the Divine teachings are based, and the ultimate aim of the revelation. We may describe it as following:

1. Allah has said that there is an interpretation for His Book. All the Qur'anic realities, laws and teachings move around that interpretation. But the said interpretation is a sublime reality; minds cannot grasp it; intelligence cannot reach it; and imagination cannot perceive it. The only exception is of those purified souls from whom Allah has removed every impurity; only they can touch it.

It is the ultimate that Allah demands from human beings – that they should answer His call to acquire the real knowledge of His Book. This Book has the explanation of everything, and the key to its secrets is the Divine Purification. Allah says:

“Allah does not desire to put on you any difficulty, but He wishes to purify you” (5:7).

In other words, the ultimate aim of ordination of the Shari'ah is the said Divine Purification.

This human perfection, like other ideals, is not attained except by a few special persons, although the Call is addressed to all. The religious training creates purity in various degrees in various people. Some reach its highest point, some to various points in between. It is like the piety (i.e., fear of Allah) to which Islam invites: ***“...fear Allah as is due to Him...” (3: 102).***

But only a handful of believers acquire perfect piety; others remain behind them, and a third band behind the second, and so on. It happens because people differ in their aptitudes and understanding.

The same is the case with social norms. The society expects every member to reach the zenith of all

desirable characteristics, like knowledge, industry, riches, comfort etc. – but only a few attain this goal; others remain behind at various points in the way, because of difference in their abilities.

Although society never remains without some individuals who attain the highest possible rank in all perfections, not everyone reaches there.

2. The Qur'an declares that the only way by which a man can reach this destination is to know himself, by acquiring true knowledge and acting upon it. On the side of knowledge, he should be taught the realities about his beginning and end as well as about what is between these two points; then he may truly know himself, in the context of all relevant realities. On the side of action, he should be made to follow the social rules – the rules that would make him live a good social life, and would not hinder him from the pursuit of knowledge and contemplation; then he should be told to perform rites of Divine Worship – these rites, if performed regularly, draw the soul towards the Creator, help the heart in concentrating on one's beginning and end, and bring it nearer to the spiritual perfection and purity, keeping it clean from the filth and dirt of materialism.

First study the verse:

“To Him do ascend the good words; and the good deed lifts them up” (35: 10).

Then add to it the following, among other such verses:

“Allah does not desire to put on you any difficulty, but He wishes to purify you and that He may complete His favour on you...” (5:7).

“O you who believe! take care of your souls; he who errs cannot hurt you when you are on the right way” (5: 105).

“Allah will exalt those of you who believe and those who are given knowledge, in high degrees” (58: 11).

Then you will clearly see what was the aim of Allah in sending down the religion and guiding the man to it, and appreciate the way He used for this guidance.

Through all this, we reach to an important conclusion:

The social laws of Islam are the stepping stones for the rites of Divine Worship, which in their turn lead the man to the knowledge of Allah and of His Signs. Even a minor infringement of, and change or alteration in, these social laws would disturb and deflect the commandments concerning Divine Worship; and that in its turn would disrupt the man's knowledge of Allah.

It is a clear conclusion; and the experience shows its truth. If you ponder on the manner in which corruption stealthily crept into Islamic affairs, and find out how it began and where it has reached, you

will see that it began with social laws, then surreptitiously it contaminated the rites of worship and ended with the rejection of the spiritual realities and man's knowledge of Allah.

Also, it was described earlier that the misleading began with following the ambiguous verses, seeking to interpret them according to the people's own liking.

3. Religious guidance is based on two pillars: Prohibition of blind following, and progress of knowledge among the religionists to the furthest limit. It is in conformity with the ultimate goal of Islam, that is, the knowledge. There is not a single Divine Book, nor a single religion, that puts so much emphasis on knowledge, and so forcefully exhorts its followers to seek it to the farthest corners of the world as Islam does.

That is why the Qur'an explains first, the spiritual realities, and then shows the relation of its practical laws to those realities. It tells the man that he exists because Allah has created him by His own power; and has appointed some intermediate agents for his creation and survival, like the angels, the skies, the earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, the vegetables, the animals and, in short, the time and the space. Now he is being irresistibly driven towards his returning place and time; striving hard to reach his Lord to meet Him; then he shall be recompensed for what he has done – either to the paradise or to the hell. This is the first set of the spiritual knowledge.

Then the Qur'an teaches him which deeds would lead him to the felicity of the paradise, and which to the infelicity of the hell. In other words, it teaches him the rules of Divine Worship and the social laws. This is the second set of that knowledge.

Then it makes him understand that these laws and commandments lead to the bliss in the next world. In other words, it tells him that the second set is related to the first; that these laws have been ordained for his own benefit, as they contain his good of this world as of the next. This is the third set.

The second set is like the preliminary; the first is like its conclusion; and the, third is like the binding cord that joins the second set with the first. The verses describing all these sets are numerous and clear in their meaning; and it is not necessary to quote them here.

4. People, generally, do not comprehend what cannot be perceived by the five senses; they do not understand ideas and realities beyond the limit of matter and nature. And those who train their minds through academic exercises to understand abstract ideas and spiritual meanings, are not all on the same level – each attains a certain degree of intellectual development and can-not understand that which is beyond it. This phenomenon causes sharp divergence in their perception of spiritual and metaphysical subjects. This vast difference is a fact that none can deny.

When we want to explain to someone a certain new idea we can do so only with the help of his previously acquired knowledge. If his perception is limited to the natural phenomena, that new idea can only be explained within the framework of that limited understanding. For example, if one wants to

explain the “taste” of marriage to a minor child, one could only say that it was sweet like honey. And if that person has some advanced intellectual capacity, we may explain those spiritual realities to the extent of his ability.

Also, it should be understood that the religious guidance is not for a special group; it is for all the people.

5. These two factors – the difference in people’s understanding and the fact that religious guidance is meant for all the people – together with the existence of the interpretation for the Qur’an, made it necessary that the spiritual realities be described in the words and phrases akin to proverbs and simile. It takes what the man already knows and uses it, because of a certain similarity, to create a picture of what he does not know. As a commodity is weighed with a stone or iron weight – there is no resemblance between the stone or iron and that commodity in form or substance, mass or volume, kind or species; the only similarity is in weight.

The Qur’an, in the verses quoted earlier e.g.:

“Surely We have made it an Arabic Qur’an, so that you may understand” (43:3).

“And surely it is in the original of the Book with Us, truly elevated, full of wisdom” (43:4).

has hinted to this fact. But it has not stopped there. It has described it clearly with the help of a parable concerning truth and falsehood; He sends down water from the heavens, then the valleys flow according to their measure, and the torrent bears along the swelling form, and from what they melt in the fire for the sake of (making) ornaments or apparatus arises a scum like it; thus does Allah compare truth and falsehood:

“Then as for the scum, it passes away as a worthless thing; and as for that which profits the people, it remains in the earth; thus does Allah set forth parables” (13:17).

This parable is as much true about Allah’s action as it is about His word. His action, like His word, is meant for truth; but both are accompanied by some unintended things. Those unintended things temporarily cover, and come above, the intended truth; but they soon go away; the truth remains and survives to benefit the people, and the scum is removed by another truth.

The above-mentioned phenomenon is a mirror of the ambiguous verses. Such a verse contains a true meaning that is actually intended; but it is accompanied by another unintended meaning that hides the intended one and races to the minds before it. But soon it is overcome and removed by another truth (a decisive verse) that identifies the true meaning, and erases the unintended one, although it had temporarily gained the upper hand. It is so that the truth is shown to be truth by His words, and falsehood is seen to be falsehood, even though the guilty may be averse to it.

This explanation shows how the parable fits the Divine words; it may in the same manner be applied to His actions.

The parable shows that the Divine realities and spiritual knowledge are like the water which Allah sends down from the heavens. At that time, it is water, in the pure sense of the word, unencumbered with any other condition. Then it starts flowing in the valleys; and now it takes the shape of the watercourse – a wide river, a narrow stream and so on. These shapes and measures are established facts, they are not imaginary things. (In this respect they resemble the benefits of the rules of the Shari'ah – we have said that they are the binding cord that connect those rules with the spiritual truths. This characteristic of the rules is an established fact; it does not depend on verbal description.)

Those rules, in the course of their flow, are often accompanied by swelling foam that appears for a time being and then vanishes. An example may be given of an abrogated verse; in the nature of thing, it should have remained in force permanently, but another verse comes along, abrogates it, and puts another rule in its place. This development also is an established fact; it does not matter whether this religious reality has been clothed with words.

The spiritual realities and metaphysical ideas, inasmuch as they are placed in the containers of the words, take the shape of those containers; and are fettered with the demands of the word and the language – though originally, they had no such limitation or restraint. These words are true and fact, because they were chosen by the truthful Speaker to convey His message. Yet they are like a similitude that represents the real meaning – the meaning that is unfettered by the words, unencumbered by the shapes of these containers. Therefore, the words pass through the minds of the hearers and unintended meanings surround them and ride high above them. It happens because the minds look at the words in the light of their previously acquired ideas. This mostly happens about those realities that are not familiar to common minds, like the spiritual facts, the real reason for which a certain rule was ordained and so on. But so far as the rules themselves are concerned, there occurs no change, because invariably always they talk about what is within the sphere of man's own activities, and is, therefore, familiar to him. This discourse shows that ambiguous verses are ambiguous because they contain the spiritual realities and not the rules of religion and Shari'ah.

6. Now we have reached the stage where we may explain why the presence of ambiguous verses was necessary in the Qur'an.

The verbal expressions of the Qur'an are like similitudes to the sublime Divine realities. Those realities have been brought down, in these verses, to the level of common minds. An average mind does not perceive except the natural phenomena; it cannot comprehend the abstract Divine realities unless they are put in the mould of concrete expressions.

When pure spiritual facts are expressed in terms of body and matter, either of the two things may happen – both of them dangerous:

A) The mind may stop at those material expressions, taking them to mean natural phenomena. It will thus fail to see the reality beyond those expressions. It will, in short, take a proverb in its literal sense,

not knowing that it signifies something else; and that that something is often not shown by its letters. Thus, the intended meaning will be neglected. The minds will not try to look behind the screen of the words, as it will not know that it has missed anything.

B) If the mind realizes that the verse is a sort of a similitude and tries to see beyond the curtain of the words, by removing from it unwanted elements that have no bearing on its intended significance, then there is a danger that it may discard some important element or leave intact some unnecessary one.

There is an Arabic proverb: “In the morning, the travellers appreciate the previous night’s journey.” Because we know the story behind this saying, when we hear it, we dispense with all its surrounding details, like the morning, the travellers and the previous night’s journey. What we understand from the proverb is this: A work is appreciated only when it is completed and its good results begin to appear; but so long as the man is engaged in that work and is undergoing hardships in that activity, he does not like it. If we did not know the story, and stopped at the literal meaning of the proverb, we would not know its significance, and the proverb would turn into a proposition or news.

On the other hand, if we did not know the story but realized that it was a proverb, we would not know how much of it should be discarded and what was its true significance.

There is only one way to avoid these two dangers, and that is to express that one significance in various proverbs, moulding each in a different mould – one proverb would contain some details that would be missing from the other, and the former would not have some details of the latter, and so on. In this way, those sentences would, through comparison and action and reaction, clarify each other and all together would show their true significance. First, the hearer, on hearing various expressions, would realize that they were not used in their literal sense; they were like the similitudes describing an abstract idea in the moulds of various concrete expressions. Thereafter, he would be in a position to know which details were to be discarded and which to be retained – because the essential factors would be present in every sentence, while unnecessary ones would be missing from one or the other.

This device to explain difficult ideas and complicated thoughts is not peculiar to the Qur’an. It is found in every language, every nation and every place. Man, by his nature, knows that if only one story, proverb or similitude is given to illustrate an abstract idea, unessential details would confuse the minds, and might convey to them a wrong meaning. Therefore, he tries to make the audience understand his idea with the help of a lot of stories and varied similitudes. So that they may distinguish the true significance from the unnecessary details.

It is now crystal clear that it was necessary – nay, essential – that the Qur’an should contain ambiguous verses; and that that ambiguousness should be removed with the help of other unambiguous verses. Those who object on the presence of such verses in the Qur’an do not know what they are talking about.

6. Conclusion

This discourse on ambiguous and decisive verses and the Qur'anic interpretation has become a bit lengthy. But through it, we have been able to clarify the following ten points:

First: The Qur'an contains two kinds of verses, the decisive and the ambiguous. If a verse, seen alone, is capable of more than one meaning, it is ambiguous; otherwise, it is decisive.

Second: The whole Qur'an, with all its decisive and ambiguous verses, has its interpretation. That interpretation is not the connotation of its words; it is an actually existing reality; a reality that has the same relation with the knowledge, facts and ideas mentioned in the Qur'an, as the significance of a proverb has with that proverb. All the Qur'anic knowledge is like a similitude for the Qur'anic interpretation that is with Allah.

Third: The interpretation may be known to the purified servants of Allah; they are the ones who are also firmly rooted in knowledge.

Fourth: It has been said in the second conclusion that the Qur'anic knowledge and ideas are like a similitude for the Qur'anic interpretation. Now, we come to a further lower level, that is, the Qur'anic words and expressions. These words and expressions, in their turn, are like a similitude to the abovementioned Qur'anic knowledge, facts, and ideas.

Fifth: It was as essential for the Qur'an to include some ambiguous verses, as it was to have some decisive ones.

Sixth: The decisive verses are the basis of the Book, to which the ambiguous ones are returned, that is, the latter are explained with the help of the former.

Seventh: Decisiveness and ambiguousness are relative qualities. The same verse may be decisive in one context and ambiguous in another. Also, it may be decisive in comparison to one verse and ambiguous in relation to the other.

There is no absolutely ambiguous verse in the Qur'an; although there is no reason why one or more verses may not be decisive.

Eighth: It is essential that the verses of the Qur'an should explain each other.

Ninth: The meaning of the Qur'an has various grades. They are placed vertically one behind the other. They are not ranked side by side, horizontally; otherwise, it would entail the use of one word in more than one meaning – and it is not permissible. Nor are they like real and metaphorical meanings; nor like various adjunct meanings attached to a real one. Rather, they are all various grades of the one real meaning – thus, they all are its real meanings, and the peoples' minds comprehend its various grades,

according to their intellectual and spiritual capacity.

This statement requires some elaboration:

Allah has said:

“Fear Allah as is due to Him” (3: 102).

The word, “at-taqwa” (التَّقْوَى = piety, fear of Allah), denotes abstaining from what Allah has forbidden and doing what He has ordered. As the verse shows, the highest grade of piety is the one mentioned therein: “as is due to Allah”. By inference, there must be other lower grades. “Piety”, or in other words, “good deeds”, are therefore of various grades, one above the other.

Also, He says: Is then he who follows the pleasure of Allah like him who has brought upon himself the wrath from Allah, and whose abode is hell? And it is an evil destination.

“They are of (diverse) grades with Allah, and Allah sees what they do” (3: 163).

It shows that all deeds – good and evil alike – are of various grades and ranks. That the diverse grades mentioned in the verse refer to the deeds, is clear from the concluding sentence, “and Allah sees what they do”. Two more verses are as follows:

“And for all are grades according to what they did, and so that He may pay them back fully their deeds and they shall not be dealt with unjustly” (46: 19).

“And all have grades according to what they do; and your Lord is not heedless of what they do” (6: 132).

There are many verses of this tenor, and among them are those that show that the grades of the paradise and depths of the hell are based on the grades and degrees of the good and bad deeds respectively.

It is known that action, of whatever kind it may be, emanates from knowledge, that is, from the relevant conviction of the heart. That is why Allah has proved infidelity of the Jews, evil intentions of the polytheists, and duplicity of the hypocrites from their actions; as the belief and faith of the prophets and the believers has been proved from their actions. The verses having this semantic flow are very numerous and there is no need to quote them here.

Every action emanates from a relevant knowledge and demonstrates it. And then that action enhances that relevant knowledge and belief and makes it firmly settled in the mind and soul. As Allah says:

“And [as for] those who strive hard for Us, We will most certainly guide them onto Our ways; and Allah is most surely with the doers of good” (29:69).

“And worship thou thy Lord until there comes to you the certainty [or, that which is certain]” (15:99).

Then evil was the end of those who did evil, because they rejected the signs of Allah and used to mock them (30:10).

“So, He made hypocrisy to follow as a consequence into their hearts till the day when they shall meet Him because they failed to perform towards Allah what they had promised with Him and because they told lies” (9:77).

There are a lot of verses of this significance; and they show that every action – good or bad – creates knowledge or ignorance (i.e., wrong knowledge) respectively.

There is a verse that contains the gist of this topic about good deeds and useful knowledge:

“To Him do ascend the good words; and the good deed lifts them up” (35:10).

It clearly says that the good word, that is, true belief, ascends to Allah and brings the believers nearer to Him; and the good deeds lift this knowledge and belief up. The ascension of knowledge and belief depends on their purity from doubt and confusion; and on undisturbed attention of the soul towards Allah. The more intense this purity, the higher the reach of that knowledge and belief.

The words used in the verse hint to this fact: The good words do ascend, and the good deeds do lift them up. Ascension is opposite of descension, and lifting up is opposite of putting down. When a thing moves from a lower to a higher level it is described in these two terms that look at the two points of the movement. It is said to be ascending, because it moves towards the higher level, coming nearer to it; and is said to be rising or lifting up, because it leaves the lower place moving away from it.

The good deeds lift the man up and remove him away from this transient world and its base desires. They do not let him ensnare himself in the trinkets of this material life, or to go and get lost in the maze of the unending and ever-changing “knowledge”. The more the good deeds lift him up, the higher his good words do ascend, and purer becomes his spiritual knowledge, farther from the impurities of confusion, doubt and imagination.

The good deeds are of diverse grades and degrees; and every grade lifts the good words and creates the knowledge of Divine realities according to its own strength and condition.

The same details are true, in reverse, for the evil deeds and bad words, that is, wrong knowledge. Evil deeds sink down the man into the yawning depths of ignorance, hypocrisy and infidelity. This subject was discussed in short in the Commentary of the verse:

“Guide us to the Straight Path” (1:6).

Now, it is clear from above that people are of different grades and ranks, so far as their nearness or distance from Allah is concerned. It all depends on their good or evil deeds and good or evil words, that is, knowledge. It goes without saying that what people of a certain grade would understand from a Divine Speech would be quite different from what those on a higher or lower level would understand from the same. That is what we mean when we say that the Qur'an has various meanings, all ranked vertically one behind the other.

Allah has mentioned in the Qur'an various categories of His servants, and has reserved for each a special kind of knowledge and cognition, For example:

a) Those who are freed (from sins) – they have been given knowledge of the attributes of their Lord:

“Hallowed be Allah, from what they ascribe” (37: 159).

“Except the servants of Allah, freed [from sins]” (37: 160).

They have also been given some other knowledge, which we shall describe, Allah willing, in some other place.

b) Those who are sure – they have the distinction. of being shown the kingdom of the heavens and the earth:

“And thus, did We show Ibrahim the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and that he might be of those who are sure” (6:75).

c) Those who turn to Him again and again – they have been favoured with minding:

“...and none minds but he who turns [to Him] again and again” (40: 13).

d) The learned ones – they understand the parables of the Qur'an:

“And these examples, We set them forth for the people, and none understand them but the learned” (29:43).

They are also the people of understanding who meditate on the Qur'an:

“Do they not then reflect on the Qur'an? Nay, on the hearts there are locks” (47:24).

“Do they not then meditate on the Qur'an? And if it were from any other than Allah, they would have found in it many a discrepancy” (4:82).

The three verses point to the same meaning – those who understand and meditate on the Qur'an, know the true meaning of the ambiguous verses returning them to the decisive ones.

e) The purified ones – they have the special distinction of the knowledge of the interpretation of the

Book:

“Most surely it is an honoured Qur’an” (56:77).

“In a Book that is hidden” (56:78).

“None do touch it save the purified ones” (56:79).

f) The friends of Allah – they are the people submerged in the love of Allah; they are inattentive to everything other than Allah; that is why they are afraid of nothing and grieve for nothing:

“Now surely the friends of Allah – they shall have no fear nor shall they grieve” (10:62).

Likewise, there are those who are near to Allah, the chosen ones, the truthful ones, the good ones and the believers. Each of these groups has a special kind of knowledge and perception reserved to it; and we shall describe them under relevant verses.

Face to face with these, are the grades of evil and falsehood, every grade having a peculiar type of misinformation and ignorance. The people of those grades are called unbelievers, sinners, unjust and so on. They are inclined to misinterpret the signs of Allah, and not to grasp the spiritual realities and their knowledge. For the sake of brevity, the verses are not given here.

Tenth: The Qur’anic verses have the capacity to be applied wherever their meanings come true. A verse is not confined to the event or circumstances in which it was revealed. It covers all situations that are akin to the circumstances of its revelation. In this respect also they are like the proverbs that are not restricted to their original occasion, but are applied to all similar situations. The principle is called the “flow of the Qur’an”, of which a short description was written in the beginning of the first volume.

[1.](#) Vide Al-Mizan Vol.5.

[2.](#) The Verses are the following:

“And your Lord has commanded that you shall not serve (any) but Him, and goodness to your parents. If either or both of them reach old age with you, say not to them (so much as) "Ugh" nor chide them, and speak to them a generous word” (17:23).

“And make yourself submissively gentle to them with compassion, and say: O my Lord! have compassion on them, as they brought me up (when I was) little” (17:24).

“Your Lord knows best what is in your minds; if you are good, then He is surely Forgiving to those who turn (to Him) frequently” (17:25).

[3.](#) al-Marfu’: is a tradition in which a narrator mentions the name/s of person/s from whom he narrates, but a later narrator omits his/their name/s. (tr.)

[1] [1]

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