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The Tower of Babel: The Confusion of Languages

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The Messenger of God was asked: "Who are the people who are qualified in sacred science?" He replied: "Those whose right hands are virtuous, whose languages are sincere, whose hearts act with uprightness in accordance with Knowledge, whose stomachs are chaste. These are the people of pure intellect." According to al-Suyuti, this Islamic tradition falls within the collections of al-Tabari, Ibn Abi Hātim, and at-Tabarani.

Koran, II:102

And they followed what the satans recited against the kingdom of Solomon. Solomon did not disbelieve, but the satans disbelieved, teaching people sorcery and that which was sent down to the two angels at Babylon, Hārūt and Mārūt. But they would not teach anyone until they had said, "We are only a trial, so do not disbelieve." Then they would learn from them that by which they could cause separation between a man and his wife. But they did not harm anyone with it, save by God's Leave. And they would learn that which harmed them and brought them no benefit, knowing that whosoever purchases it has no share in the Hereafter. Evil is that for which they sold their souls, had they but known. (Surah al-Baqarah, 2:102)

This verse has been the subject of debate among exegetes due to the wealth of historical elements, which are articulated in a variety of teachings and allusions found in written documents dating back to the time of King Solomon that are said to have contained elements of magic with which he administered power. These documents were buried under his tomb but were discovered by ambitious individuals in later times who made blasphemous use of them.

Another tale briefly contained in this verse is the story of two angels, Harut and Marut, who were arrogant toward humanity, which they considered inferior due to their carelessness and weakness in making mistakes. The two angels were sent to earth where they fell in love with Venus, who, in the guise of a beautiful woman, intoxicated them, leading them to commit all kinds of sins. These stories are criticized and deemed unfounded by some traditional commentators such as Ibn Kathir and al-Razi.

The teaching on magic warns against the manipulation of power and the occult forces of illusion that seek to deceive the faith and reason of believers by producing an effect or an ambition to possess invisible faculties or cosmic influences. Among these manipulations are the persuasion of eloquence and the accusation leveled against the Prophet Muhammad by idolatrous and polytheistic pagans that his call to the worship of a Single God was merely feeble magic.

Commentators describe King Solomon as a ruler who had received from God extraordinary knowledge capable of governing the winds and spirits in the service of his kingdom. Solomon was aware of the divine origin of this knowledge and never used it against its nature. Likewise, the two angels who taught mankind how to read and harness the hidden forces of the cosmos did so with the intention of serving the good, reminding the souls of men not to perversely abuse it. Scholars interpret this reminder as a reminder to prioritize the authority of the spirit and the heart, and not to follow the lower, passionate sides of the individual soul.

XXVIII:38

Pharaoh said, “O notables! I know of no god for you other than myself. So kindle for me a fire, O Hāmān, for clay, and make me a tower, that haply I may behold the God of Moses, though truly I think he is among the liars.” (Surah al-Qasas, The Story, XXVIII:38)

It is said that the Pharaoh believed himself to be the highest god, a supreme god, the greatest. There are no obvious traces of the actual physical construction of a tower. One tradition says that a very tall tower was indeed built, and the Pharaoh climbed to the top of this tower to shoot an arrow into the sky. The arrow, blown by the wind, returned and struck the Pharaoh, who was left bleeding. Al-Razi, in his commentary, expresses his amazement at the ridiculous arrogance of those who are capable of building a tower higher than a mountain in order to climb it armed and challenge the heavens.

III:7

He it is Who has sent down the Book upon thee; therein are signs determined; they are the Mother of the Book, and others symbolic. As for those whose hearts are given to swerving, they follow that of it which is symbolic, seeking temptation and seeking its interpretation. And none know its interpretation save God and those firmly rooted in knowledge. They say, “We believe in it; all is from our Lord.” And none remember, save those who possess intellect.

(Surah Al-Imrān, The House of Imrān, III:7)

This verse of the Revelation has been the subject of studies on the science of interpreting the language of God. Each *ayah* of the Holy Koran is a sign that the believing Muslim can recognize within himself and outside himself. Every sign can be determinate or symbolic, *muḥkam* *aw* *mutashābih*.

The verb *hakama* indicates the meaning of ordering, judging, determining. The symbol can be something that represents something similar, but it can also represent something invisible, unknown, and indeterminate.

Scholars attribute to the Holy Koran the characteristic of being a Book with evident signs and also a marvelous narrative similar to a Book. The verse recited above tells us that it can be both determinate and indeterminate. It can be completely determinate as the Book of Allah and also completely indeterminate as an articulation of beauty and a discursive representation of symbols and internal meanings.

What makes the Holy Koran determinate is its being the source of religious law, the source of religious behavior, the observance of prayer to the One God, the practice of justice, trust, generosity, humility, the condemnation of murder, theft, and adultery, the distinction between what is permitted and what is forbidden, the difference between what has a single interpretation and what can have multiple interpretations, and the precision in the stories of the lives of the prophets. What is determinate is unambiguous, clear, and unequivocal. What is symbolic lends itself to different levels and shades of meaning.

The Matrix of the Book is the archetype and origin of the Book, the Principle of the Book's spiritual authority. Unfortunately, human hearts and vision can be misled and tempted to ignore the effort of reconnecting to the One Principle and instead misinterpret the signs. The subsequent and consequential temptation is to create scandalous confusion, engendering doubts and false reasoning in the hearts of believers.

A quality interpretation allows signs to reacquire their value and meaning in light of their origins, functions, and purposes. This science of symbolic interpretation belongs to God, who distinguishes it from the reading of specific parts of Revelation.

The certainty of faith and meditation on the depth of the signs accompany the Muslim believer in the progressive opening of the heart and understanding of God's science and language, avoiding fanciful speculation and artificial rigidity of approach and application.

As Ali (ؑ) teaches us: "The true scholars are those whose knowledge has protected them from falling into the quibbles and subtleties of interpreting the Holy Koran by exposing whims and arguments devoid of any real connection to the science of the unseen world." Thus God (ؑ) guides and reveals Himself with His secrets to whomever He wills from within the sacred knowledge that He Himself has placed in the hearts of these His chosen ones in grace.

Muhammad bin Jarīr al-Tabarī has collected and commented on a part of a complex grammatical debate and traditional data and interpretations on this verse.

According to his teachings, among the characteristics of clarity of clear signs, of the verses of Revelation whose interpretation is unambiguous, is the evidence of God's promise and threat, *wa'd wa'id*, the reality of things and actions that are evidently capable of bringing benefits or punishment. The clear

signs are verses that establish the foundations of sacred worship for the Muslim community and are clearly reflected in the teachings and behavior of the Prophet Muhammad and the scholars.

The meditation or debate would therefore concern whether and how to interpret those signs that present multiple interpretations and are also found in various parts of the Revelation and can take on different meanings. The knowledge of these verses belongs to God and is not accessible to ordinary people.

There are individuals who follow an inclination, a malign attraction that leads them to speculate, manipulate, and cultivate the ambiguity of meaning of certain mysterious verses, causing falsehoods, doubts, confusion, deviations, and infiltrations that destabilize the order and nature of God's Revelation.

It is said that the Christian delegation in Najran met the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and asked him: "Do you testify that Jesus is the Word of God and a Spirit from Him?" The Prophet (ﷺ) replied: "Certainly!" The Christians replied: "That is enough for us!" But doubt crept into the souls of some individuals inclined to quibble over the hidden meanings of these symbolic attestations, and God commanded the verse: "Truly, in God's sight, the likeness of Jesus resembles the likeness of Adam."

Speculation about the mysteries of some of Allah's signs apparently took the form of a futile discussion with God's messenger and the apparent goal of gleaning knowledge about the duration of Islam or the nature of Jesus. The interpretation of the allegories in God's mysterious verses is a secret that belongs to God. The science of *ta'wil* is the science that leads back to the Origin, the Ontology, the Essence, the Principle, the spiritual Unity of God's signs with His Lordship and Authority.