

Towards Understanding the Quran

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وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةَ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً ۖ قَالُوا أَتَجْعَلُ فِيهَا مَنْ يُفْسِدُ فِيهَا وَيَسْفِلُ الْمَمَاءَ وَنَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ وَنُقَدِّسُ لَكَ ۗ قَالَ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

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لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

(2:30) Just think³⁶ when your Lord said to the angels:³⁷ "Lo! I am about to place a vicegerent³⁸ on earth," they said: "Will You place on it one who will spread mischief and shed blood³⁹ while we celebrate Your glory and extol Your holiness?"⁴⁰ He said: "Surely I know what you do not know."⁴¹

36. Thus far man has been summoned to serve and obey God on the grounds that God is his creator and sustainer, that in His grasp lies man's life and death, that He alone is the Lord Who rules over the entire universe in which he lives. In view of this, the only attitude which can be deemed appropriate for man is one of service and subjection to God.

The same idea is presented in the following section, but supported on slightly different grounds

In this connection the Qur'an defines precisely the true nature of man and his correct position in the universe. It also enlightens us to a period of man's past which is otherwise inaccessible. What the Qur'an tells us here, with its practical consequences, is of far greater value than knowledge derived by unearthing bones and pottery, and piecing together scattered fragments of information with the help of conjecture.

37. The word malak in Arabic means 'message'

38. 'Khalifah' or vicegerent is one who exercises the authority delegated to him by his principal, and does so in the capacity of his deputy and agent. Hence, whatever authority he possesses is not inherently his own, but is derived from, and circumscribed by, the limits set by his principal. A vicegerent is not entitled to do what he pleases, but is obliged to carry out the will of his master. If the vicegerent were either to begin thinking himself the real owner and to use the authority delegated to him in whatever manner he pleased, or if he were to acknowledge someone other than the real owner as his lord and master and to follow his directions, these would be deemed acts of infidelity and rebellion.

39. This was not said by way of objection or protest. It was said rather by way of inquiry and in order to satisfy their curiosity; it is inconceivable that the angels could object to any of God's decisions. The word 'vicegerent' suggested to them that the proposed species of creation would be placed on earth with some authority. It was incomprehensible to them how a species of being which had been invested with discretionary power and authority could conform with the overall order of the universe, which is based on absolute and involuntary subservience to the Will 

They thought that investing anyone with authority in any part of the universe would lead to mischief and disorder. It is this aspect which the angels were curious about.

40. This does not mean that the angels considered themselves suitable for 'vicegerency'. They merely wanted to point out that God's orders were already being carried out fully, that they - the angels - were engaged in doing His will and that according to His Divine will the entire universe was kept in a state of absolute purity; moreover, God's glory was constantly being extolled and His holiness celebrated. Since all these things were being done, they wanted to ask what gap was still considered to exist that called for the creation of a new species of being to fill it.

The word tasbih has two meanings: (i) to proclaim glory and (ii) to exert oneself earnestly and energetically. In the same way taqdis has two meanings: (i) to celebrate or proclaim holiness and (ii) to purify.

41. This was an answer to the latter doubt expressed by the angels. The angels were told that the reason for the appointment of a vicegerent was best known to God alone and could not be understood by them. Despite the services rendered by the angels, something over and above their work was still required. God decided, therefore, to create a new species of being in the world and to invest it with some authority.

وَعَلِمَ أَدْمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا ثُمَّ عَرَضَهُمْ عَلَى الْمَلَائِكَةِ فَقَالَ أَنْجِلُونِي بِاسْمَاءَ هَؤُلَاءِ إِنْ

كُنْتُمْ صَدِيقِينَ ٣١

(2:31) Then Allah taught Adam the names of all things⁴² and presented them to the angels and said: "If you are right (that the appointment of a vicegerent will cause mischief) then tell Me the names of these things."

42. The nature of man's knowledge is such that he acquires information of different things through their names. Hence it might be said that the sum total of man's knowledge consists of the names of things. To teach Adam the names of all things means, therefore, imparting the knowledge of those things. us.43 you, only You, are All-Knowing, All Wise.'

قَالُوا سُبْحَنَكَ لَا عِلْمَ لَنَا إِلَّا مَا عَلَمْتَنَا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ ٣٢

(2:32) They said. "Glory to You! We have no knowledge except what You taught us.⁴³ You, only You, are All-Knowing, All-Wise."

43. It seems that the knowledge of each angel and each genre of angel is confined to its own sphere of competence. The angels appointed to administer, let us say, things relating to air have full knowledge about this subject but have no knowledge, say, about water, and so on and so forth. Man's range of knowledge, however, is comprehensive. Even if man's information in a particular area may be narrower than that of the angel directly concerned with it, the total range of his knowledge has a comprehensiveness which has not been granted to the angels.

Recite

قَالَ يَادُمْ أَنْبِئْهُمْ بِاسْمَآئِهِمْ فَلَمَّا آتَاهُمْ قَالَ الَّمْ أَقْلَ لَكُمْ إِنِّي أَعْلَمْ
 غَيْبِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَأَعْلَمْ مَا تُبَدِّلُونَ وَمَا كُنْتُمْ تَكْنُمُونَ

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(2:33) Then Allah said to Adam: "Tell them the names of these things."⁴⁴ And when he had told them the names of all things, Allah said: "Did I not say to you that I know everything about the heavens and the earth which are beyond your range of knowledge and I know all that you disclose and also all that you hide?"

44. This demonstration of Adam's capacity was an answer to the first of the doubts the angels had expressed. In this manner, they were made to realize that God had not only bestowed some authority upon man, but had also endowed him with knowledge. Fear of mischief and disorder through man's appointment as vicegerent is only one aspect of the matter. The other aspect is constructive and offsets man's potentiality for spreading mischief. For the wise will not sacrifice a major good for fear of a minor harm.

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلِئَكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِلْأَدَمَ فَسَجَدُوا إِلَّا إِبْلِيسُ أَبِي وَاسْتَكَبَرَ وَكَانَ مِنَ

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الْكُفَّارِينَ

(2:34) And when We ordered the angels: "Prostrate yourselves before Adam," all of them fell prostrate,⁴⁵ except Iblis.⁴⁶ He refused, and gloried in his arrogance and became one of the defiers.⁴⁷

45. This signifies that all the angels whose jurisdiction embraces the earth and that part of the universe in which the earth is situated were ordered to devote themselves to man's service. Since man had been invested with authority on earth the angels were told that whenever man wanted to make use of the powers with which he had been invested by God, and which God of His own will had allowed him to use, they should co-operate with him and enable him to do whatever to do, irrespective of right and wrong.

This can be understood with reference to the manner in which government employees are required to work. When a sovereign appoints a governor or a magistrate, all government employees under his jurisdiction are duty not. But as soon as the sovereign indicates to those employees that the governor or magistrate should be barred from doing something, the effective authority of the governor or the magistrate comes to an abrupt end. In fact, were the sovereign to issue the order that the governor be dismissed or imprisoned, the same employees who until then had been moving to and fro at his bidding would not feel hesitant in putting hand on him and taking him to prison.

God's order to the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam was of a similar nature. It is possible that prostration signifies the fact of their becoming yoked to man's service. At the same time it is also possible that they, were ordered to perform the act of prostration itself as a sign of the envisaged relationship between angels and man. In my view the latter seems more plausible.

Recite

46. Iblis literally means 'thoroughly disappointed; utterly in despair'. In Islamic terminology the word denotes the jinn who, in defiance of God's command, refused to obey and to yoke himself to the service of Adam and his progeny and asked God to allow him a term when he might mislead and tempt mankind to evil and error. He is also called al-Shaytan (Satan)

In fact Satan (or Iblis) is not an abstract, impersonal force. Like human beings he is possessed of a specific personality. Moreover, one should not make the mistake of considering Satan an angel. Elsewhere the Qur'an itself clearly states that he was a jinn and jinn, as we know, are an independent species, distinct from the angels. See(Qur'an 18: 50.)

47. These words seem to indicate that in committing disobedience Iblis was probably not alone. What seems to have been the case is that a section of the jinn was bent upon rebellion and the name of Iblis is mentioned only because he was their leader and the most noted among them for his rebellion. Another translation of this sentence could be: '? and he was of the defiers (kafirin)'. If this sense is correct, these words would signify that there was already a party of rebellious and recalcitrant jinn and that Iblis belonged to that party. In the Qur'an the word shayatin (satans) denotes these jinn and their offspring. Hence, whenever the context itself does not indicate that the term has been used for human beings who possess satanic attributes, the word 'Satans' should be understood to signify these satanic jinn.

وَقُلْنَا يَادَمٌ اسْكُنْ أَنْتَ وَزَوْجُكَ الْجَنَّةَ وَكُلَا مِنْهَا رَغْدًا حَيْثُ شِئْتُمَاٰ وَلَا تَقْرَبَا

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هَذِهِ الشَّجَرَةُ فَتَكُونُنَا مِنَ الظَّالِمِينَ

(2:35) And We said: "O Adam, live in the Garden, you and your wife, and eat abundantly of whatever you wish but do not approach this tree⁴⁸ or else you will be counted among the wrong-doers."⁴⁹

48. This indicates that before man was sent to earth Moreover, for this kind of test Paradise was the best possible place. What God wanted to impress on man was that the only place that befits man's station is Paradise, and that if man turns from the course of obedience to God as a result of Satanic allurements, he will remain deprived of it in the Next Life even as he was deprived of it once before. The only way he can recover his true status and reclaim the lost Paradise is by resisting effectively the enemy who is always trying to drive him off the course of obedience to God.

49. The use of the word 'wrong-doer' is highly significant. 'Wrong-doing' consists in withholding someone's rights and the wrong-doer is one who withholds those rights from their legitimate claimants. Anyone who disobeys God withholds three major rights. The first is what is due to God, for He has the right to be obeyed. Second, there are the rights of all those things which a man employs in disobeying God. The parts of his body, his mental energy, his fellow-beings, those angels who, under Divine dispensation, have been appointed to enable him to achieve his aims. both righteous and unrighteous, the material objects which he employs in his acts of disobedience - all these have a rightful claim upon him to be used in ways that please God. But when he uses them in ways which displease God he commits wrong against them all. Third, he wrongs his own self which has the right to be saved from perdition. By inviting punishment from God because of his disobedience he wrongs his own self as well. It is for these reasons that the word 'wrong' is often used in the Qur'an for sin, and the word 'wrong-doer' for sinner

Recite

فَأَزَّلْهُمَا الشَّيْطَنُ عَنْهَا فَأَخْرَجَهُمَا مِمَّا كَانَا فِيهِ وَقُلْنَا اهْبِطُوا بَعْضُكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ

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عَدُوٌّ وَلَكُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ مُسْتَقْرٌ وَمَتَاعٌ إِلَى حِينٍ

(2:36) But Satan caused both of them to deflect from obeying Our command by tempting them to the tree and brought them out of the state they were in, and We said: "Get down all of you; henceforth, each of you is an enemy of the other,⁵⁰ and on earth you shall have your abode and your livelihood for an appointed time."

50. This means that Satan is the enemy of man, and vice versa. That Satan is the enemy, of man is obvious enough, for he tries to drive him off the course of obedience to God and leads him to perdition, but one might wonder how man could be referred to as the enemy of Satan. The fact is that man's essential humanity makes this enmity incumbent upon him. Man, however, is often deceived by Satan and befriends him owing to the temptations that he holds out to him. This kind of friendship does not mean that the basic, irreconcilable clash of interests between man and Satan has been resolved. It only means that one of the two (Satan) has defeated and successfully trapped the other (man).

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فَتَلَقَّ أَدْمَ مِنْ رَبِّهِ كَلِمَتٍ فَتَابَ عَلَيْهِ إِنَّهُ هُوَ التَّوَّابُ الرَّحِيمُ

(2:37) Thereupon Adam learned from his Lord some words and repented⁵¹ and his Lord accepted his repentance for He is Much-Relenting, Most Compassionate.⁵²

51. This means that when Adam became conscious of his act of sin and wanted to return from his state of disobedience to that of obedience, and when he tried to seek remission for his sin from God, he was unable to find the words to use in his prayer to God. In His Mercy God taught him the words with which he could pray.

The word tawbah basically denotes 'to come back, to turn towards someone'. Tawbah, on the part of man, signifies that he has given up his attitude of disobedience and has returned to submission and obedience to God. The same word used in respect of God means that He has mercifully turned towards His repentant servant so that the latter has once more become an object of His compassionate attention.

52. The Qur'an refutes the doctrine that certain consequences necessarily follow from sins and that man must in all cases bear them. In fact this is one of the most misleading doctrines to have been invented by human imagination. If it were true it would mean that a sinner would never have the opportunity to have his repentance accepted. It is a mechanistic view of reward and punishment and thus prevents and discourages the sinner from trying to improve.

The Qur'an, on the contrary, tells man that reward for good actions and punishment for bad ones rests entirely with God. The reward that one receives for good acts is not the natural consequence of those acts; it is rather due to the grace and benevolence of God and it is entirely up to Him to reward one or not. Likewise, punishment for evil deeds is not a natural and unalterable consequence of man's acts. God has full authority to punish man for his sin as well as to

Recite 1

him.

God's grace and mercy, however, are interrelated with His wisdom. Since He is wise, He does not use His power arbitrarily. Hence, whenever God rewards a man for his good acts, He does so because the good was done with purity of intention and for the sake of pleasing God. And if God refuses to accept an act of apparent goodness, He does so because that act had merely the form or appearance of goodness, and was not motivated by the desire to please God.

In the same way God punishes man for those sins which he commits with rebellious boldness, and which whet his appetite for more rather than lead him to repentance. Similarly, in His mercy God pardons those sins which are followed by genuine repentance and readiness on the part of the sinner to reform himself. There is no need for the criminal to despair of God's grace and mercy, no matter how great a criminal he is. Nor is there any reason for even the most rabid disbeliever to despair, provided he recognizes his error, repents of his disobedience and is ready to replace his former disobedience with obedience.

قُلْنَا اهْبِطُوا مِنْهَا جَمِيعًا فَإِمَّا يَأْتِيَنَّكُمْ مِّنْ هُدًى فَمَنْ تَبَعَ هُدًى إِلَيْهِ فَلَا خَوْفٌ

عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

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(2:38) We said: "Get you down from here,⁵³ all of you, and guidance shall come to you from Me: then, whoever will follow My guidance need have no fear, nor shall they grieve.

53. The reiteration of this statement is significant. We have been told above that Adam repented and that his repentance was accepted by God. This means that the stain of sin was washed away and therefore no stain remained

On the contrary, God not only accepted Adam's repentance but also honoured him by endowing him with prophethood so that he might be able to direct his children correctly. The repetition of the order to leave Paradise and go down to earth is aimed at driving home the point that earth was not created as a place of punishment for man. On the contrary, man was put on earth to serve as God's vicegerent there. It was only to test man and thereafter to equip him for the performance of God's vicegerency that man was placed temporarily in Paradise. See also(n. 48 above.)

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَكَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا أُولَئِكَ أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ هُمْ فِيهَا خَلِدُونَ

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(2:39) But those who refuse to accept this (guidance) and reject Our Signs as false⁵⁴ are destined for the Fire where they shall abide for ever."⁵⁵

54. Ayat is the plural of ayah which means a 'sign' or 'token' which directs one to something important. In the Qur'an this word is used in four different senses. Sometimes it denotes a sign or indication. In certain other places the phenomena of the universe are called the ayat (signs) of God, for the reality to which the phenomena point is hidden behind the veil of appearances. At times the miracles performed by the Prophets are also termed ayat since they show that the Prophets were envoys of the Sovereign of the universe. Lastly, individual units of the Book of God are also called ayat because they point to the ultimate reality, and because the substantive contents of the Recite f

God, its phraseology, its style, its inimitable literary excellence are clear tokens of the attributes of the Author of the Book. The sense in which the word ayah has been used in a particular verse becomes evident from the context of its occurrence.

55. This is a permanent directive from God to mankind which is valid from the beginning of life until the Day of Judgement. It is this which has been mentioned earlier as God's covenant see ([n. 31 above](#)).

It is not for man to prescribe the way of life which his fellow human beings should follow. In his double capacity as the subject and vicegerent of God, man is required to follow the way of life prescribed by his Lord. There are only two means of access to this way: either by direct revelation from God or by following one to whom God has revealed guidance. Nothing else can direct man to the way that enjoys God's approval and good pleasure. Resorting to any other means in quest of salvation is not only fundamentally mistaken but tantamount to rebellion.

The story of the creation of Adam and the origin of the human species occurs seven times in the Qur'an, once in the verses just mentioned. For other references see ([7: 11 ff](#)), ([15: 26 ff](#)), ([17: 61 ff](#)), ([18: 50](#)), ([20: 116 ff](#)), ([38: 71 ff](#)). The story also occurs in the Bible in Genesis 1, 2 and 3. A comparative reading of the Qur'anic and Biblical versions will enable the perceptive reader to detect the differences between the two.

The dialogue between God and the angels at the time of the creation of Adam is also mentioned in the Talmud. This account lacks the spiritual significance underlying the Qur'anic version. Indeed, the Talmudic version additionally contains the following oddity: when the angels ask why men are being created, God replies that they are being created so that good people may be born among them. God refrains from mentioning the bad people lest the angels disapprove the creation of man! (See Paul Isaac Hershon, Talmudic Miscellany, London, 1880, pp. 294

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