

Tafseer Al-Baqarah [The Muhkam and the Mutashabiha]

From the Book, Introduction to the Tafseer of the Quran,

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The Muhkam and the Mutashabiha (المحكم والمتشابه) The Clear and the Ambiguous)

An important matter in the sciences of the Quran that relates to the interpretation of Allah's verses, other than literal and metaphorical meaning, is the existence of the clear and the ambiguous in the Book. Allah (swt) said, ﴿هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَابَهَ مِنْهُ ابْتِغَاءَ الْفِتْنَةِ وَابْتِغَاءَ تَأْوِيلِهِ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِيهِ يُذَكِّرُونَ أَمَّا بَعْضُ الْمَنَافِقِ فَيُضِلُّونَ السَّبِيلَ أَتَسْتَأْذِنُ مَنَافِقٌ فَسَوْفَ يَكْفُلُونَ كَفْلَهُ طَائِفَةٌ مِنْهُمْ يَأْمُرُ بِالْعَدْلِ وَآخَرَةٌ مِنْهُمْ يَأْمُرُ بِالزُّلْمِ وَالزُّلْمُ أَكْبَرُ مِنَ الْعَدْلِ طَائِفَةٌ مِنْهُمْ يَأْمُرُ بِالْعَدْلِ وَآخَرَةٌ مِنْهُمْ يَأْمُرُ بِالزُّلْمِ وَالزُّلْمُ أَكْبَرُ مِنَ الْعَدْلِ﴾ "It is He who has sent down to you the Book. In it are verses that are entirely clear - they are the foundation of the Book - and others that are ambiguous. As for those in whose hearts is deviation, they follow that of it which is ambiguous, seeking discord and seeking an interpretation suitable to them. And none knows its true interpretation except Allah. And those firm in knowledge say, "We believe in it. All of it is from our Lord." And none will be reminded except those of understanding."

Is the interpretation of the ambiguous verses known only to Allah (swt), or only to Allah (swt) and those firmly grounded in knowledge?

In other words, is the letter "waw" in ﴿وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ﴾ "and those firmly grounded in knowledge" for conjunction, so that ﴿وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ﴾ "and those firmly grounded in knowledge" are connected to Allah (swt), and thus they know the interpretation of the ambiguous, or is the "waw" for resumptive continuity, so that stopping is necessary after ﴿إِلَّا اللَّهُ﴾ "except Allah," so that only Allah (swt) knows the interpretation of the ambiguous, and those firmly grounded in knowledge are the beginning of a new resumed in continuity sentence?

By reflecting on this noble verse, it becomes clear that the more likely meaning of the conjunction "wa" is simple conjunction (atf), not resumptive continuity (istinaaf), for the following reasons:

1. Allah (swt) says, ﴿هَذَا بَيَانٌ لِلنَّاسِ وَهُدًى وَمَوْعِظَةٌ لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ﴾ "This is a clear statement to mankind, a guidance and an admonition to the righteous" [TMQ Surah Aali Imran 3:138]. If the conjunction "wa" (and) is used to indicate a new beginning, meaning that Allah (swt) alone knows the interpretation of the ambiguous verses of the Quran, then this implies that there are verses in the Quran that people do not understand. This would mean that the Quran is not a clear statement to mankind, since it contains verses whose meaning people cannot comprehend. Therefore, interpreting "wa" as indicating a new beginning contradicts the meaning of the verse, ﴿هَذَا بَيَانٌ لِلنَّاسِ﴾ "This is a clear statement to mankind" [TMQ Surah Aali Imran 3:138].

As for making the "waw" for simple conjunction, it makes the meaning: that the ambiguous can be explained to people through those firmly grounded in knowledge, and this is consistent with the Quran being an explanation for people.

2. Allah (swt) has specified an additional attribute for ulema, which is firm grounding in knowledge. In Arabic, mentioning an additional attribute is appropriate to the ruling it relates to. If the conjunction "wa" (and) is for resumptive continuity, then the following sentence is new, meaning the reading begins with it, ﴿وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ آمَنَّا بِهِ﴾ "And those firmly grounded in knowledge say, "We believe in Him." This means that this additional attribute of firm grounding in knowledge is related to ﴿يَقُولُونَ آمَنَّا بِهِ﴾ "they say, "We believe in

Him.”” Since belief does not require an additional attribute of knowledge, and indeed ulema and even non-ulema have the capacity to believe in Allah (swt) and do not need firm grounding in knowledge to believe, this additional attribute of firm grounding in knowledge does not fit what follows it, ﴿يَقُولُونَ آمَنَّا بِهِ﴾ “they say, “We believe in Him”” with it.

However, if you make “wa” for conjunction (atf), then firmness in knowledge is due to knowing the interpretation of the ambiguous, and this really requires firmness in knowledge, because the ambiguous verses are those that have more than one meaning and it is difficult to determine the intended meaning, and thus their meaning is ambiguous to the listener and the reader, such as, ﴿يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ﴾ “The Hand of Allah is above their hands” [TMQ Surah Al-Fath 10] ﴿وَيَبْقَى وَجْهُ رَبِّكَ﴾ “And the face of your Lord will remain” [TMQ Surah Ar-Rahman], and such as ﴿وَالْمُطَلَّقَاتُ يَتَرَبَّصْنَ بِأَنْفُسِهِنَّ ثَلَاثَةَ قُرُوءٍ﴾ “And divorced women shall wait concerning themselves three menstrual periods” [TMQ Surah Al-Baqarah 228], so this is not an evidencing (dalaalah) that is definitive (qaati’ah) like the clear one which has one evidencing alone.

The ambiguous in this case requires a firm grounding in knowledge to understand its interpretation; that is, it does not only require ulema to understand its interpretation, but also those ulema firmly grounded in knowledge.

The additional description of firmness in knowledge is appropriate for understanding the interpretation of the ambiguous. The conjunction “waw” (and) is preferred in the conjunction, and the reading is, ﴿وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ﴾ “And none knows its interpretation except Allah and those firmly grounded in knowledge.”

From this, it becomes clear that the most likely interpretation of the aforementioned “waw” is that it is for conjunction.

The meaning of the noble verse is that the Quran contains verses that are clear and unambiguous, whose meanings are evident and do not require great effort to understand. Instead, they can be understood by those whom Allah has granted appropriate knowledge.

And it also contains other verses that are ambiguous, whose meanings fluctuate between more than one interpretation. These require considerable effort to determine the most likely meaning, and it requires not only ulema but those who are more knowledgeable, those firmly grounded in knowledge, to interpret them and determine the most likely meaning.

The verse also clarifies two important points:

1. The muhkam (clear) verses are the foundation of the Book, meaning its origin and what it refers to. This means that if two texts address the same issue, one with a single meaning, clear and unambiguous, and the other with multiple meanings, mutashabiha (ambiguous), then the clear verse prevails over the ambiguous one, and the meaning of the ambiguous verse must be interpreted in light of the clear one.

2. Those whose hearts harbor doubt and deviate from the truth delve into ambiguous verses, without the necessary qualifications, seeking to sow discord and distort the truth through misinterpretation and misrepresentation, aiming to cause confusion and misguidance.

Therefore, those who delve into ambiguous verses without the necessary qualifications may commit a grave sin, potentially leading to disbelief, and it results in the denial of a fundamental tenet of Iman or a Shariah ruling known by necessity in Islam (معلوم من الدين بالضرورة ma’loom min ad-Din bidaroorah).

Whoever does not know the interpretation of ambiguous verses should say, “I do not know,” for the matter is serious and requires not only knowledge but also profound understanding. If one is not qualified, then one should seek guidance from the mujtahidoon (jurists capable of deriving rulings) who are qualified and learn from them, lest one incur the great Wrath of Allah (swt).