

آيات محكمات وآيات متشابهات

Shaykh Muhammad ibn Sālih al-'Uthaymeen

TAFSEER OF THE VERSE: VERSES THAT ARE ENTIRELY CLEAR AND VERSES THAT ARE NOT ENTIRELY CLEAR ¹

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَبَهَ مِنْهُ ابْتِغَاءَ الْفِتْنَةِ وَابْتِغَاءَ تَأْوِيلِهِ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالرَّسُخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ ءَامَنَّا بِهِ كُلٌّ مِّنْ عِنْدِ رَبِّنَا وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّا أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ ﴿٧﴾

It is He Who has sent down to you (Muhammad) the Book. Among them are verses that are entirely clear, they are the foundations of the Book; and others not entirely clear. So as for those in whose hearts there is a deviation, they pursue that which is not entirely clear thereof, seeking discord and seeking an interpretation [suitable to them]. And no one knows its [true] interpretation except Allah. And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: "We believe in it; the whole of it is from our Lord." And none receive admonition except those who are endowed with insight.

The pronoun 'He' refers to Allah. Look carefully at how some verses are interrelated with others. When Allah mentions that He is the Giver of forms (الْمُصَوِّرُ)—and form giving is the early stage of creating, He mentions thereafter the Book's revelation via which guidance is achieved. This is similar to His statement,

¹ Translation by Abu Ameenah, AbdurRahman Bennett.

الرَّحْمَنُ ۝ عَلَّمَ الْقُرْآنَ ۝ خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ ۝ عَلَّمَهُ الْبَيَانَ ۝

1. The Most Merciful 2. Taught the Qur'an, 3. Created man, 4. [And] taught him eloquence.

In some verses, Allah makes clear a worldly blessing by mentioning it first, and in other verses He makes clear a religious blessing by mentioning it first. In this verse (i.e., **He is the one who sent down**), He mentions formation prior to mentioning the Qur'an's revelation; whereas in the chapter of ar-Rahmān, He mentions teaching the Qur'an prior to creating mankind.

The word **'Book'** refers to the Qur'ān, and straight afterwards Allah partitions the verses of the Book. He states, **"among them are verses that are entirely clear; they are the foundations of the Book and others not entirely clear"**. In other words, **"among them are others not entirely clear"**. We had to say here **"among them are others not entirely clear"** so as to flesh out the compound partitioning. For the word **'others'** is a subject for an omitted predicate, i.e., **"among them others not entirely clear"**. A similar arrangement can be found in Allah's statement,

فَمِنْهُمْ شَقِيٌّ وَسَعِيدٌ ۝

And among them will be the wretched and the prosperous.

The word **'prosperous'** does not subordinately link back to **'wretched'** via the coordinating conjunction **'and'** because if it did subordinately link back, it would spoil the partitioning. Thus, the implied meaning is **"And among them will be the wretched and among them will be the prosperous."**

The term **'unclear'** (الاشتباه) could refer to a lack of clarity in meaning whereby its meaning is unclear or it could refer to textual inconsistencies whereby someone may think that certain Qur'ānic verses contradict each other. Irrespective of the case, this is impossible because Allah states,

أَفَلَا يَتَذَكَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ ۚ وَلَوْ كَانَ مِنْ عِنْدِ غَيْرِ اللَّهِ لَوَجَدُوا فِيهِ اخْتِلَافًا كَثِيرًا ۝

82. Then do they not reflect upon the Qur'an? If it had been from [any] other than Allah, they would have found within it much contradiction.

The Qur'ānic verses are consistently in harmony with one another. As for those who assert that there are contradictions in the Qur'ān then this is due to four possible reasons:

1. A deficiency in knowledge (فُصُوْر فِي الْعِلْمِ)
2. A deficiency in understanding (فُصُوْر فِي الْفَهْمِ)
3. A deficiency in careful consideration (فُصُوْر فِي التَّدْبُرِ)
4. Bad intent (سُوْء فِي الْقَصْدِ) whereby he [conveniently] belies the Qur'an²

If such a person harbours this type of misgiving, believing that the Qur'ānic text contains irreconcilable differences then he has been deprived of all good due to harbouring thoughts unfit for the Qur'ān.

Allah states, **'among them are verses that are entirely clear'**. The word *āyat* (verses) is the plural for *āyat* (verse) and it means a sign/emblem (عَلَامَةٌ) [by which is a person or thing is known]. For every *āyat* in the Qur'ān is an emblem representing the Revealer of these verses in terms of its inimitability and open challenge to mankind. His statement **'that are entirely clear'** means verses that are precise and exact (مُنْفَقَات) in terms of their meaning, legal rulings and information. The chapters that provide information and legal rulings are precise and disclosed whilst free of any textual obscurity.

His statement **'and others not entirely clear'** means that their legal rulings are undisclosed and their [detailed] information is undisclosed. So the phrase **'entirely clear'** refers to verses that are precise in their meanings, irrespective if they are informative verses or legal rulings. Whereas, **'not entirely clear'** refers to verses that are not entirely clear in their meaning, irrespective if they are informative verses or legal rulings. For this reason, we find some verses give no clear indication of the ruling on which it was inferred and likewise some informative verses do not entirely disclose all related information.

His statement, **'they are the foundations of the Book'** is introduced as a descriptive clarifying statement to qualify these **entirely clear verses** so that the immediate thing which comes to mind is that the **not entirely clear verses** are to be referred back to the **entirely clear verses** [for correct

contextualisation]. These **entirely clear verses** are the mother [of the Book] and the mother of a thing is its point of origin, just as Allah states:

يَمْحُوا اللَّهُ مَا يَشَاءُ وَيُثَبِّتُ^ط وَعِنْدَهُ^و أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ ﴿٣٩﴾

39. Allah eliminates what He wills or confirms, and with Him is the Mother of the Book.

The Mother of the Book refers here to the Preserved Tablet (اللُّوحُ الْمَحْفُوظُ) which all books are preserved in. The chapter *al-Fātiha* is also called the Mother of the Book because all themes found in the Qur'an source back to it. So it is a must that these **entirely clear verses** remain the reference point for the **not entirely clear verses**.

Allah states, **'So as for those in whose hearts there is a deviation, they pursue that which is not entirely clear thereof, seeking discord and seeking an interpretation [suitable to them].'** With regard to the **not entirely clear verses** people can be divided into two groups:

1. A group who pursues the **not entirely clear verses**, giving them particular attention by presenting them before the people to cynically query their meanings.
2. A group of people who say, **"We believe in it; the whole of it is from our Lord. It is impossible for these verses to be contradictory because they are from our Lord. Rather they are unified and in agreement.** The **not entirely clear verses** are returned to the **entirely clear verses** and all of them become completely clear.

His statement, **'in whose hearts there is a deviation'**. The word deviation (الزَّيْغُ) carries the meaning of divergence. The Arabs say, **'The sun diverged (زَاغَتْ)'** at the time when it declines from the meridian. In other words, their hearts have deviated from the truth. They do desire truth; they only desire to pursue the **not entirely clear verses** to make the Qur'anic verses which contain some vagueness clash with one another to avert people from the path of Allah and to make them doubt the speech of Allah. As for those who have no deviancy in their hearts, those who are firmly rooted in knowledge, they possess the knowledge that gives them the know-how to reconcile between the **not entirely clear verses** and to identify their correct meanings. These people do not experience these verses as not entirely clear. Rather, **"We believe in it; the whole of it is from our Lord"**. They do not see in the Qur'an anything contradictory.

All of the innovators from the Rāfidha, Khāwarij, Mu'tazila, al-Jahmiyya etc. seek out the verses which are not entirely clear. However, these deviant sects, independently or collectively, seek out the **not entirely clear verses** for two or one of two reasons:

1. **Seeking fitnah**—i.e., to avert people from the religion of Allah. The word fitnah carries the meaning of averting from the path of Allah, as stated by Allah:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ فَتَنُوا الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَتُوبُوا فَلَهُمْ عَذَابُ جَهَنَّمَ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابُ الْحَرِيقِ ﴿١٠﴾

10. Indeed, those who **put into trial** the believing men and believing women and then have not repented will have the punishment of Hell, and they will have the punishment of the **Burning Fire**.

Putting them to trial means here to avert them from Allah's religion.

2. **Seeking its interpretation**—i.e., interpreting these verses in a way which suits their agenda. For they explain them according to their meaning and not the meaning intended by Allah.

Allah states, **'And no one knows its [true] interpretation except Allah. And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: "We believe in it; the whole of it are from our Lord.'** The Salaf differed with regards to whether one should pause his reading. The majority of the Salaf paused at **'And no one knows its [true] interpretation except Allah'** and then treat the next clause: **'And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: "We believe in it"'** as an independent clause.³ If we treat them as two independent clauses then the 'and' (الواو) is a discourse marker which marks a clause that is independent from what precedes it. The noun phrase **'And those who are firmly grounded'** is the subject and the verb **'say'** is its predicate. [The syntax of the sentence] means that the meaning here is that the **not entirely clear verses** are only known to Allah. As for those who are firmly grounded in knowledge, who are not familiar with their meanings, then they **"We believe in it; the whole of it are from our Lord**. There is no such thing in the speech of our Lord as contradictions and conflicting statements". They surrender the

³ [TN]: In other words, as a discourse marker to show a change in topic.

matter to Allah because He knows what He intends by His verses. Therefore, people can be categorised into two categories:

1. those who are firmly grounded in knowledge and
2. those in whose hearts is a deviation who pursue that which is not entirely clear thereof.

Some of the Salaf did not pause between the clauses and proceeded to coordinate between them. So the ‘and’ here is for coordinating, and as such the noun phrase ‘**And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge**’ subordinately coordinates back to the lofty name of Allah. In other words, **no one knows its interpretation except for Allah and those who are who firmly grounded in knowledge**, unlike those who have a deviance in their hearts then they do not know.

It seems as if both readings are at odds with one another because the first reading implies that only Allah knows the interpretation of **not entirely clear verses**. Whereas the second reading implies that only Allah and those who are firmly grounded know its interpretation. It seems that they are at odds with one another. The truth, however, is that both readings do not contradict one another, and that this discrepancy is based on a semantic difference surrounding the word *ta’weel* in Allah’s statement ‘**And no one knows its ta’weel except Allah**’. If the intended meaning behind *ta’weel* is *tafseer* (explanation/exegesis) then not halting at the name of Allah is appropriate because those who are firmly grounded in knowledge know the *tafseer* of the **not entirely clear verses**. They are well aware of their meanings due to their deep-rootedness in knowledge, proficiency and profundity. The one who is deeply rooted in something is someone who is steadfast and cemented. So they—due to their steadfastness and consolidated and penetrative knowledge—possess knowledge which is hidden from others.

As for when we render the meaning of *ta’weel* as **the end result** and **the unknown endpoint** then the appropriate thing is to halt at ‘**except Allah**’. Since the end result of these **not entirely clear verses** is unknown to creation. Thus, the word *ta’weel* can carry the meaning of **explanation/exegesis** and it can carry the meaning of the **unknown outcome/result** which no one knows except Allah. Both meanings are found in the Qur’ān. An example of the first is

إِنِّي أَرْنِي أَحْمِلُ فَوْقَ رَأْسِي حُبْرًا تَأْكُلُ الطَّيْرُ مِنْهُ نَبِّئْنَا بِتَأْوِيلِهِ ۗ إِنَّا نَرْنَكَ مِنَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

36. "Indeed, I have seen myself carrying upon my head [some] bread, from which the birds were eating. Inform us of its **interpretation**; indeed, we see you to be of those who do good."

In other words, "inform us of its tafseer [explanation]". Another example is the statement of Allah's Messenger to Ibn Abbās:

اللهم فقهه في الدين وعلمه التأويل

O Allah, give him comprehension of the religion and teach him the **interpretation**.

In other words, "give him interpretation of speech and comprehension of its meaning".

An example of the second meaning is

هَلْ يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَّا تَأْوِيلَهُ يَوْمَ يَأْتِي تَأْوِيلَهُ يَقُولُ الَّذِينَ نَسُوهُ مِنْ قَبْلُ قَدْ جَاءَتْ رُسُلُ رَبِّنَا بِالْحَقِّ ﴿٥٣﴾

53. Do they await except its **result**? The Day its **result** comes those who had ignored it before will say, "The messengers of our Lord had come with the truth.

His statement, "Do they await except its result" means its final outcome and that which it comes to. "The Day its result comes" its final outcome will come about which they have been promised. Another example is

ذَلِكَ خَيْرٌ وَأَحْسَنُ تَأْوِيلًا ﴿٥٤﴾

That is the best [way] and best in **result**.

In other words, the best of outcomes and final result.

It should be noted that many of those people who speak on creedal issues interpret the words **not entirely clear verses** to mean the verses that reference Allah's attributes. They assert that all the verses which are not entirely clear refer to His attributes. There is no doubt that unreservedly equating the unclear verses with the verses of Allah's attributes is not a sound opinion because the verses that reference Allah's attributes are both known and unknown. From a meaning perspective, they are known (i.e., their meanings). It is inconceivable to think that Allah would address us and

speak to us about His self with unknowable matters from which we cannot derive any semantic benefit and that, with reference to us, these words are nothing more than alphabets devoid of any meaning. This is simply impossible. However, from an actuality and modality perspective they are unknown. We do not know the modality of Allah’s Hands or their reality. We do not know [what] the Face of Allah looks like or its reality. We do not know the true reality of Allah’s knowledge. We do not know all of His attributes and nor do we know their realities because states,

وَلَا يُحِيطُونَ بِهِ عِلْمًا

110. ...and they will never compass anything of His Knowledge.

Whoever asserts that the verses of Allah’s attributes are in absolute terms from the **not entirely clear verses** then he has erred. The matter requires detail. We say that if you mean by them being from the **not entirely clear verses** that they are not clear in terms of knowing their modal reality then you are correct. However, if you mean that the meanings used to express Allah attributes are unknown then you are sorely mistaken. Those who subscribe to this [erroneous] view state that the verses which refer to Allah’s attributes and the ahādith are completely unknown in their meaning to us, Allah’s Messenger, Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthmān, Ali, Ibn Abbās, the jurists of the Sahābah and their successors and the Imāms of Islam. When we ask them,

“What is the meaning of Allah rising above His Throne?”

They say, “Allah knows best”.

“What is the meaning of Allah’s hand?”

They state, “Allah knows best”.

“What is the meaning of ‘And the Face of your Lord will remain’?”

They say, “Allah knows best”.

Everything which relates to Allah’s attributes, they say, “Allah knows best”. The odd thing is that this statement, which is extremely flawed is, is thought by some people to be the creed of the people of the Sunnah or even the Salaf to the extent that this statement has led them to utter a [false] adage:

طَرِيقَةُ السَّلَفِ أَسْلَمٌ وَطَرِيقَةُ الْخَلْفِ أَعْلَمٌ وَأَحْكَمٌ

The way of the Salaf (early generations) is safer but the way of the Khalaf (later generations) is more knowledge-based and wiser.

This statement **the way of the Salaf is safer but the way of the Khalaf is more knowledge-based and wiser** is the peak of falsehood. Rather, we say, **“The practice of the Salaf is safer more knowledge-based and wiser!”**. Some of the people [erroneously] thought that the method of the Salaf [re Allah’s names and attributes] was التَّفْوِضُ (entrustment)—in other words: a lack of knowledge of the meaning [of Allah’s attributes] and a no-talking policy regarding them. They even postulate that this was the way of Allah’s Messenger! They believe if you were to ask the Messenger regarding the meaning of **“Allah, the Exalted, smiles at two men, one of them killed the other and both will enter Jannah,”** he would say, **“I don’t know”**!! And likewise, his statement, **“Our Lord, the Blessed and the Exalted, descends every night to the lowest heaven when one-third of the latter part of the night is left”**. If you were to ask the Messenger, **“What is the meaning of ‘descending’”** they claim that the Messenger would say, **“I don’t know”**!! This is what they claim! And it is an astonishing claim that is far from the truth!

Therefore, we say that the verses of Allah’s attributes are from the **not entirely clear verses** in terms of their reality and modality because no human being can possibly comprehend these mighty attributes. However, in terms of their [basic] meanings then they are distinctly clear and informative [in their meaning]. All of us know the meaning of knowledge, ascending, face and hand.⁴ And for this reason, Imām Mālik said a very famous statement that was also said by his teacher:

الْأَسْتِوَاءُ غَيْرُ مَجْهُولٍ وَالْكَيفُ غَيْرُ مَعْقُولٍ وَالْإِيمَانُ بِهِ وَاجِبٌ وَالسُّؤَالُ عَنْهُ بِدْعَةٌ

[Allah’s] ascension is not something unknown, however the modality is unknown.

[despite that] Belief therein is mandatory and asking questions about it is an innovation.

For example, we know the meaning of an eye;⁵ however the actual reality and modality of Allah’s eye is unknown. A created eye is known to be made up of reducible complexity, such as veins, pupil etc. However, we cannot say that Allah’s eye is made up of such reducible complexity because [this is not a created eye and] Allah’s eye is unknown to us. Thus, the reality of Allah’s eye is unknown, but the meaning of the eye—and it is a thing by means of which vision or sight are

⁴ [TN]: The problem is that people conflate the meaning of hand with a type of hand, most commonly a human hand.

⁵ [TN]: If right now we are thinking about a human eye, then we have gone beyond the meaning of an eye and fallen into the modal realms of a type of eye. A human eye is a type of eye from the genus of eyes. We should not muddy distinctions and thus fall headfirst through the branches of *tamtheel* and then *ta’teel* and then *tahreef*.

achieved—is known to us. This also applies to Allah’s hands. The meaning of hand is known. The meaning of fingers is known. Grasping with a hand is known. Taking via the hand is known. However, the reality of Allah’s hand is unknown and we are not able to speak regarding its modality. And if someone were to make the claim of possessing knowledge of its modality then he is a liar.

These are the meanings of their respective realities, and so realities are one thing and their meanings are another. Trust me when I say that if we were to say **“We do not know the meanings of the verses of Allah’s attributes”** that we have lost 30 percent or more of the Qur’an’s meanings because we hardly find a verse without it mentioning Allah’s names or His attributes.

His statement, **“[they] say: ‘We believe in it’”**. In other words, **“We [unreservedly] attest to it, the verses that are entirely clear, and others not entirely clear”**. As for the verses that are **entirely clear** then they are self-evident and they are fully aware and at peace with their meanings. As for the **not entirely clear verses** then their faith in these verses is complete assent and agreement. And consequently, they say **“the whole of it is from our Lord”** because it is simply impossible for these verses to contain any textual inconsistencies or contradictions.

His statement,

وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّا أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

“And none receive admonition except those who are endowed with insight”

The particle **ما** is a negative particle. The original form of the verb **يَذَّكَّرُ** is **يَذَّكَّرُ**. However, the **تاء** was replaced with a **ذال** and assimilated into a second **ذال** and became **يَذَّكَّرُ**. The meaning of which is: **no one takes heed of the Qur’an and benefits from it except for those who are endowed with insight (i.e., endowed with intelligence)**. The word **أَلْبَاب** is the plural for **أَب** and it is a synonym for intelligence (**العقل**). The intended meaning of ‘intelligence’ here is **cognitive and discernment-based intelligence** which is the opposite of irrationality and **conduct and regulatory based-intelligence** which is the opposite of foolish and irrational behaviour. The one who receives admonishment from the Qur’an is the person whom Allah has endowed with **cognitive and discernment-based intelligence** and he also endowed him with **conduct and regulatory based-intelligence**. As for the person who has been endowed with the first type of intelligence, which is the opposite of irrationality, but not the second type of intelligence, which is

the opposite of foolish and irrational behaviour, then he will neither prosper nor benefit from the Qur'ān.⁶

⁶ [TN]: Perhaps a good personified example of this dichotomy of intelligence is Albert Einstein who was clearly well endowed with the first type of intelligence but lacking in the second type. When it came to the field of physics, he clearly excelled but when it came to utilising such knowledge to affirm a Creator, he fell well short of the proverbial mark.