

Tafsir Surat al Baqarah: 2:30 to 39

RSC YOUTH BIRMINGHAM

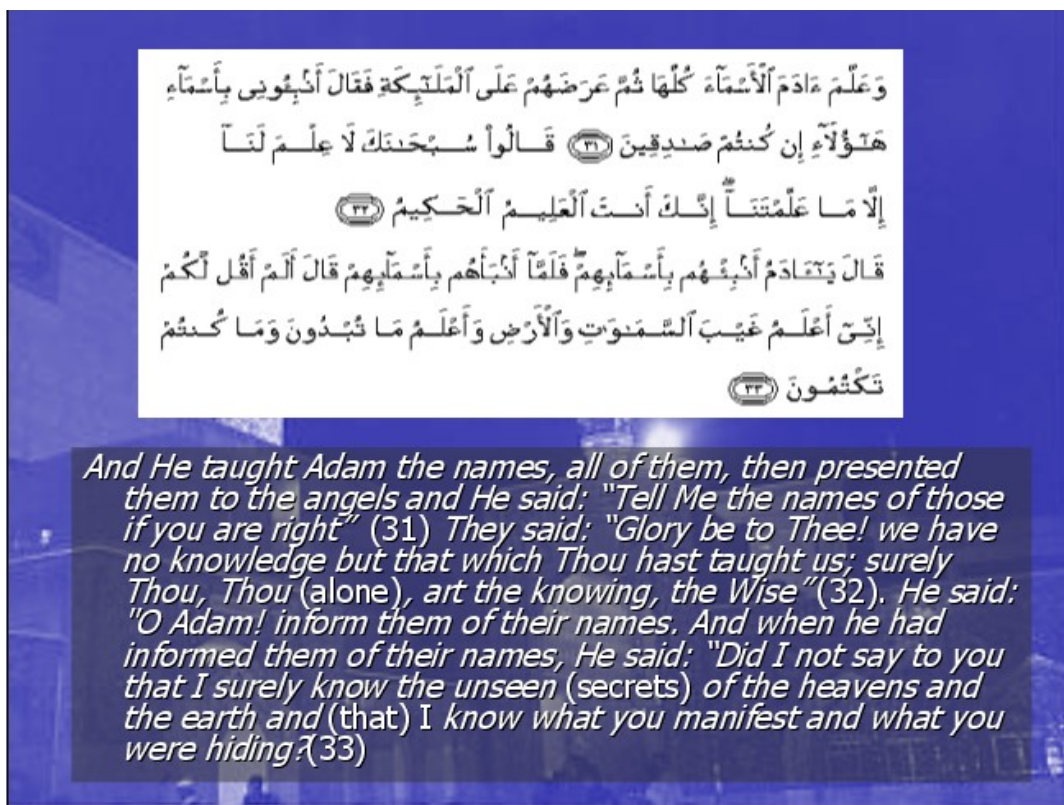
talk delivered on 26th night of Ramadan, 29/10/05

LECTURE 2: ayas 31-33

Introduction and summary of previous lecture:

Previously, in verse 30 we were introduced to the history of the creation of mankind, his purpose – to be khalif – to the two sides of his nature (earthly and spiritual), his capacities and his role. We were also introduced to the angels – perfect obedient worshippers of Allah yet lacking the qualification of khalifa – and to the concept of khalifa in the absolute; where we discussed the qualifications of a khalif in light of the Quran and the definition that it is to represent Allah’s will at all times, independently yet perfectly in accordance with His laws. In the following lecture we continue the story, and discuss the subject of Adam’s (as) qualification above the angels: his knowledge of the “names”.

The verses, 2:31-33



وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا ثُمَّ عَرَضَهُمْ عَلَى الْمَلَائِكَةِ فَقَالَ أَنْبِئُونِي بِأَسْمَاءِ هَٰؤُلَاءِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿٣١﴾ قَالُوا سُبْحٰنَكَ لَا عِلْمَ لَنَا إِلَّا مَا عَلَّمْتَنَا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٣٢﴾ قَالَ يَتَّبِعْتُمْ أَنْبِيئَهُمْ بِأَسْمَائِهِمْ فَلَمَّا أَنْبَأَهُمْ بِأَسْمَائِهِمْ قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُلْ لَكُمْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ عَالِمِينَ غَيْبِ السَّمٰوٰتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَأَعْلَمُ مَا تُبْدُونَ وَمَا كُنْتُمْ تَكْتُمُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

And He taught Adam the names, all of them, then presented them to the angels and He said: "Tell Me the names of those if you are right" (31) They said: "Glory be to Thee! we have no knowledge but that which Thou hast taught us; surely Thou, Thou (alone), art the knowing, the Wise" (32). He said: "O Adam! inform them of their names. And when he had informed them of their names, He said: "Did I not say to you that I surely know the unseen (secrets) of the heavens and the earth and (that) I know what you manifest and what you were hiding?" (33)

In reply to the angels question of how man could be khalif, Allah said He knew what they did not know. The next thing He did was to teach Adam (as) the “names”. To understand what these “names” are, we need to examine the verses. First we see that they are something Allah knew about, but the angels did not even know of their existence. Before demonstrating Adam’s (as) knowledge of the names, Allah asked the angels to describe the names, which they were not capable of doing. Also, the understanding of these names given to nabi Adam (as) is not simply learning some words; because when Adam (as) tells the angels about the names, the angels do not get the same knowledge as him and are still not capable of becoming khalifs. The true knowledge of these names referred to is specific to human beings, and in showing this nabi Adam (as) proved his qualification to be khalifa above other

creatures. We see that the names can only properly, truly, be appreciated by mankind, and this is the reason which Allah has chosen him as khalifa, despite human limitations and imperfections. As was mentioned in the previous lecture, these verses indicate the entirety of humankind were created in order to be khalifs, therefore this special knowledge of the names must be ingrained in every human being, for all time. It is a special kind of knowledge which does not become outdated or lost with time, it cannot be forgotten or die as time passes and nations deviate from the truth; but gets newer and fresher with each development of mankind. It is linked to human nature, and we discover more aspects and depths of it as we grow on both a collective and individual basis. With every new avenue of wisdom or knowledge man discovers, there is a mirroring discovery of a capacity within ourselves to harness it; which is a reflection of the knowledge of these “names”. It is worth noting here that angels are already perfectly obedient to Allah, they have no progression and learning as humans do.

If we look at 2:31 carefully, we note that the masculine plural pronoun “ ‘arathahum” (“He showed them”) is used in conjunction with the names. If referring to a group of inanimate objects or concepts such as laws, a feminine singular pronoun is used such as “hathihi” or “tilka”; for example, as in “tilka hudud Allah”, “these are the boundaries (laws) of Allah”. A masculine pronoun such as this is only used when referring to *conscious, living beings*. This makes it clear that the term “names” doesn’t refer to a set of words or rules, but to some living subjects which *possess* the names: the subjects of the verse are those beings which are Named. We also note that a *plural* pronoun is used, so we cannot conclude that the names under discussion were the Names of Allah which appear in the Quran; as Allah is One. The names refer to *several conscious living beings*, which were completely veiled from the angels. These beings have such an amazing status that simply knowing them can elevate the rank of human beings from one who will cause chaos, mischief and bloodshed into the khalif of Allah – the ideal representative of Allah. These beings are *human*, as knowledge of them is inherently linked in all humans and no other creature, and until Allah revealed them, their characteristics and qualities were unknown to the angels. These beings are the highest and most perfect creations of Allah and His true khalifa, for whose first manifestation on the earth nabi Adam (as) was chosen. Due to an understanding inside mankind of these names, humans may too become manifestations of the qualities of these perfect vicegerents, and thus reach the status of vicegerency themselves.

We see that in these verses we are introduced to the *actual individuals* which fit under the banner of the ideal of khalifate which was previously introduced; we meet Allah’s perfect creatures, true and eternal khalifs, and learn that through knowing them and being like them, we can fulfil our own capability to become khalif. With this knowledge it is possible to clarify the role of all humans in this light, and to conclude that human beings must strive to be true manifestations of *these beings* in order to fulfil their destiny of vicegerency. All humans must try to be as much like them as we can, and strive to become a reflection of the perfection of the state of humanity which is only found in them.

So who are these perfect beings?

The Holy Prophet (saw) has said, in regards to these verses:

“The objects shown to the angels were 5 lights. Allah informed the angels pointing to each light respectively: This is Muhammad, the most praised, derived from My name, the Praised One. This is Ali, the high, derived from My name, the Highest. This is Fatima, the original, derived from My name, the Originator of the Heavens and Earth. This is Hassan, the bountiful, derived from My name, the Benefactor. This is Husayn, the good, derived from My name, the Good in Origin.

O angels! It is in love of these 5 that I have created the universe!”¹

In another hadeeth, the Prophet (saw) says:

¹ Pooya/ Ali tafsir of 2:30-33, available online at www.al-quran.org.uk

“In a time before time, the Most High created Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hassan and Husayn... before the creation of Adam, when as yet there was neither heaven, nor earth, nor darkness, nor light, nor sun, nor moon, nor paradise, nor hell... They became, and ascribed glory to Allah when there was no other existence to give Him glory.

When God proposed to create the universe, He expanded the light of Muhammad that was derived from Himself. He formed from it the empyrean [universe], therefore Muhammad is more excellent than it. He next expanded the light of Ali, and from it formed the angels, consequently he is more excellent than they. He then expanded the light of the Prophet’s daughter Fatima, and from it formed the heavens and earth, which are therefore inferior to her. Afterwards, He expanded the light of Hassan, and from it formed the sun and moon, so that he is superior to them. And lastly, He expanded the light of the Prophet’s grandson Husayn, and from it formed paradise and the hoorees, therefore he is more excellent than they are.”²

And in another hadeeth, after the first creation of the light of Muhammad (saw):

“...the Most High thus addressed him, “O My beloved! Best of My Prophets! First of My creatures! Last of My Apostles! Be thou advocate in the Day of Reward.” The light of Muhammad then fell in adoration, and when it arose there formed from it 124,000 drops, from every one of which Allah formed a prophet, thus completing the number of those sacred messengers.”³

In a similar hadeeth, the narration continues to say:

“...one hundred and twenty-four thousand drops dropped from it; and Allah created from each drop the soul of a prophet and apostle. Then the souls of the prophets began breathing, and Allah created from their breasts the souls of (His) friends and the martyrs and the good ones.”⁴ [or in some narrations, the hearts of all shi’a].

These narrations clarify the concepts of the verses for us: the world was created for the Prophet (saw) and Ahlul Bayt (as), the perfect humans and true vicegerents of Allah. We see the order of creation made evident, especially the final narration: we have a distinct chain, with the Prophet (saw) and Ahlul Bayt (as), the 14 Infallibles, as the highest and most perfect creations of Allah; then the 124,000 prophets (as) (313 of them bearing scriptures) which acted as the immediate vicegerents of Allah upon the earth, and a physical manifestation and reflection of the most perfect khalifs of Allah (as). Following them are Allah’s friends and the martyrs, and then finally us. We come to realise the immense blessing of Allah in sending His most beloved, perfect creatures to guide us out of all of the people in history; our Prophet (saw) and Imams (as) sent to teach us our faith, which is the final perfection of religion upon the earth.

Through understanding these verses in the light of hadeeth, we can come closer to appreciating the greatness of our Prophet (saw) and Imams (as), and their status with regards to the rest of creation. We can never be the same as them by virtue of their excellent natures and the manner of their creation, but we must try to become like them in order to fulfil our destiny. In order to emulate them we must know them, we must learn as much about their natures as we can, and we can only be successful in our goal by following them. Love of them is derived from love of Allah, as they are his representatives on earth, and reflect His attributes. To be like them is to please Allah, as they are the perfection of the state of vicegerency for which mankind was created. To know them is, at its most basic, to be human; and at its best, to know them is to know Allah through their representation of His will. Although

² Hiyat al Qulub, Muhammad Baqir al Majlisi [tr. Rev. J. L Merrick] , ch.1, p.4

³ Hiyat Al Qulub, as previously cited, p.5

⁴ Tafsir al Mizan, 2:30-33, as previously cited

prophethood has ceased the line of prophets is still living in Allah's book and the practices of the Apostle (saw), embodied in the person of the Last Imam (as), the great Reformer who will implement what the Last Prophet (saw) has brought. We can never be happy or successful in ignorance of our Imam (as) because it will be ignorance of our most immediate and personal example, our Divinely appointed leader, the great hope for all humanity, and the final manifestation of the Light of the most beloved of all creatures to Allah for whose sake the world was created. And knowledge of them is in *all of us*, in the form of the "names". It is ingrained in us, and does not die; we must embrace it and do our best to do as Allah wishes. ***We are all capable of doing what Allah created us to do***, and He is the Best of Creators.

Summary:

To follow on from the previous verses in which we met the idea of the ideal khalifate, in these verses we are introduced to the actual people who have attained this status. As the creation story progressed, we discussed the qualification which made Adam (as) capable of being the khalif: his knowledge of the "names" which the angels could not equal. We also covered the interpretation that these "names" refer to Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hassan and Hussein (as), through grammatical indications and numerous ahadeeth. So we have the concepts of prophets as manifestation of the perfection of humanity found in these ideal people, and the order of creation from the Prophet (saw) and Ahlul Bayt (as) in the highest, through the rest of the prophets, friends of Allah and martyrs, down to us as believers. Not only do these verses indicate and explain the exalted status of the Prophet (saw) and Ahlul Bayt (as), such that simply knowing them can raise one who sheds blood and makes mischief to become khalif; but they also specify the path for man to take in order to succeed in his purpose of being created, and become a khalif by manifesting the qualities of these perfect examples in himself. We also have a continued account of the story of Nabi Adam (as), his creation and capabilities and the proof of his worthiness to the angels. The story of Nabi Adam (as) in the Quran is very important, to show us how we can succeed in spite of our human nature and the mistakes we may make. The passage ends with the statement of Allah that He knows what they make manifest and what they were hiding. Although some interpret this 'hiding' to refer to the angels, it is also interpreted as an introduction to the pride, arrogance and disbelief of Satan which becomes apparent in the following verses. Satan was outwardly one of the greatest worshippers of Allah, but upon being asked to bow to Adam (as) his true jealousy and arrogance revealed itself, and he turned away from Allah in the most dramatic way for all eternity; in sharp contrast to the goodness of the angels, who asked a question then immediately admitted their ignorance and submitted to Allah. But inshaAllah, we will cover this in the next lecture.

Appendix: the Imam of the Age⁵

NB: This material was not included in the lecture but is important within the context of our responsibilities towards our Prophet (saw) and Ahlul Bayt (as) as our leaders and perfect examples.

With regards to the Imam of the Age (aj), there is a specific requirement and responsibility upon every Muslim to know him (as), as the Quran states that each people will be called with their Imam on the Day of Judgement⁶, and following the wrong imam will lead to a painful punishment⁷. The Prophet (saw) has emphasised the importance of knowing the Imam (as) for Muslims with the statement that whoever dies without knowing the Imam of his age, dies the death of Jahiliyya⁸. The power of this statement is indicated by the sharp contrast between the actions of a good Muslim and those of the time of Ignorance, when idols were worshipped, the flesh of dead animals was eaten and all sorts of

⁵ taken from discussion assignment #1 (by the author), Imam Mahdi (aj) course, Etrat University, 2005

⁶ Quran, 15:71

⁷ Quran, 28:41

⁸ ibid.

abominations were committed. Knowing the imam of the age (as) is particularly important nowadays, as the present age poses a great number of challenges and temptations over and above simpler times in the past. For us as Muslims, there are no more Divine revelations or messengers with clear miracles as immediate examples. The examples of the lives of previous messengers are available to us, but do not cover all situations which may be encountered in the current age. The period of occultation of the imam (as) has been mentioned in traditions as the most difficult and severe test of God, and the faith of believers compared to that of the followers of Noah (as), who remained steadfast after a severe trial⁹.

The Mahdi (as) is the imam of the time, who appreciates the trials and suffering of the people of this age, who witnesses the conflict and oppression upon his subjects and is eagerly awaiting the time of his own reappearance, just as his subjects await it. He is a leader for all believers, and may be known by any who wish to know him. He is concealed from sight, but still guides his followers when they need it¹⁰. His coming will herald the end of injustice upon earth and the fulfilment of the divine promise made in every revealed faith. Firm faith in his reappearance (as) is a source of strength and motivation for all believers, to strive to possess the characteristics and qualities of the imam's (as) companions, as well as a comfort of faith in a happy future¹¹. Even if death claims us before his (as) coming, awaiting the Mahdi (as) will in itself become our deliverance. Imam Jafar as Sadiq (as) has said, according to hadeeth:

"One who is zealous about the companionship of Imam Mahdi (a.s.) should wait and act piously and in a noble manner. Such people when they die before the reappearance of Imam Mahdi (a.s.) will have the reward of being his companion. Hence strive and wait. You deserve this, O Forgiven Ones!"¹²

May Allah grant us the strength and patience to be amongst those who eagerly await the advent of our beloved Imam (aj). In His hands alone are all Power and Might.

⁹ <http://www.duas.org/SahifaMahdi/Index.htm>

¹⁰ see <http://www.al-islam.org/kaaba14/15.htm> for stories

¹¹ Imam Mehdi course, Lesson 2, as previously cited

¹² <http://www.duas.org/SahifaMahdi/Index.htm>