

Questions are often raised about the understandability of the Qur-aan: Is it easy to understand or not? Can anyone read it and get its message or is it understood only by some highly educated scholars? Can people learn its meaning and convey it to other people or is it the prerogative of only a select few? Should people even try to understand and reflect upon it, or listen to only what scholars tell them?

Let us explore these questions in the light of the Qur-aan and its own history.

The Qur-aan introduces itself as “guidance for those who have Taqwa”, which means that anyone who is sincere in avoiding Allaah’s displeasure and seeking His pleasure must be able to find guidance in it. If a person with the right attitude of Taqwa cannot find guidance from it without going to a “scholar” the Qur-aan has failed (na’oodzubillaah) in its self-stated purpose.

The Qur-aan also claims:

The reality is that the **right way has become distinct from error**; therefore, whoever disbelieves in the Taaghoot and believes in Allaah, he indeed has grasped the most trustworthy handle that never breaks. And Allaah is Hearing, Knowing (Al-Baqarah 2:256).

This is a **clear warning for people and guidance and instruction** for those who have Taqwa. (Aali ‘Imran 3:138)

Thus do **We expound the revelations** so that the believers’ attitude is highlighted as well as the way of the criminals becomes **evident**. (Al-An’aam 6:55)

O people! There has come to you advice from your Lord and healing for human psyche ¹ as well as guidance and mercy for the believers. (Yoonus 10:57)

Warn them of the Day when We will raise up from every people a witness against them from among themselves, and We will bring you as a witness against these people; and for that purpose, We have sent down to you the **Book explaining everything ² clearly**, and a guidance and mercy and good news for the Muslims. (An-Naĥl 16:89)

Now there has come to you **a clear proof from your Lord and guidance and mercy**. Who then could be more wrong than he who denies Allaah's signs and turns away from them? We will soon recompense those who turn away from Our signs with the worst of punishment because of their aversion. (Al-An'aam 6:157)

Verily We have sent down for you revelations which **clearly expound true guidance**, and examples of those who passed away before you, and an admonition for those who adopt Taqwa. (An-Noor 24:34)

A Messenger who recites to you Allaah's verses that **clearly expound the guidance** so that He may bring out those that believe and act righteously, from every kind of darkness into light. (At-Talaaq 65:11)

Allaah SWT also calls the Qur-aan a light:

O people! There has come to you a convincing proof from your Lord and We have sent to you **a clear light**; so, those who believe in Allaah and hold fast unto Him, soon will He admit them to mercy and grace from Himself, and show them a straight path to Himself. (An-Nisaa 4:174-175)

O people of the Book! Verily Our Messenger has come to you revealing to you much of what you used to conceal of the Book and passing over much of it. There has come to you from Allaah **a Light, a Clear Book** by which Allaah guides those who seek His pleasure to the ways of peace and brings them out of utter darkness into the light, by His will, and guides them to the straight path. (Al-Maaidah 5:15-16)

So those who believe in him, honour him, help him, and **follow the light** which has been sent

down with him, they will be the successful.” (Al- A’raaf 7:157)

Thus We revealed to you revelation (Rooh) by Our command; otherwise you did not know what the Book was, nor what the faith was. But We made it **a light whereby We guide** those of Our servants whom We please to the Right Way. (Ash-Shoora 42:52)

So believe in Allaah and in His Messenger and in **the Light that We have sent down**. Allaah is fully aware of what you do. (At-Taghaabun 64:8)

In addition to the verse 5:15 quoted above, Allaah SWT mentions the Qur-aan at seven other places as “al-Kitaab al-Mubeen” that is “a Clear Book” (12:1, Al- 15:1, 26:2, 27:1, 28:2, 43:2 and 44:2). This attribute of the Qur-aan implies that:

- It describes its teachings clearly and unequivocally, and conveys its message consistently and without any contradictions;
- Its teachings are so straightforward, logical, rational and sensible that a person who sincerely wants to find the truth can easily do so just by reflecting on it;
- It clearly identifies right from wrong, and truth from falsehood; and
- The words and teachings of the Qur-aan are such an obvious and evident miracle that every reasonable person who reflects on it will witness that it cannot be a human product but is clearly the revealed word of Allaah. Thus, for the sincere truth seekers, no other miracle is needed as an evidence of the Prophet being the true messenger of Allaah.

This attribute of the Qur-aan also suggests that it is a clear evidence of its own reality. Those who disbelieve are doing so not because the truth is not evident, but only because they do not want to believe.

According to the above-quoted verses, the Qur-aan itself is a light that shows the way and expounds its message, without requiring anyone to throw light on it. Just like a shining sun, its message is self-evident that does not need anyone to interpret it for people. It provides clear teachings and guidance to sincere people who approach it for that purpose. It makes the fact very clear that Allaah SWT is the Creator of this universe and everything in it; He is One, Unique and Infinite in all His attributes; and Human beings have been created as His slaves who should live in submission to Him. For that purpose, the Qur-aan provides proper guidance as to:

- What are the true beliefs and views that people should have, and what are the false beliefs and view people should stay away from;
- The evidence in terms of signs and the rational reasoning for the true beliefs and falsity of wrong beliefs;
- What kind of lifestyle people should embrace;
- What pleases the Master and what displeases Him; and
- What are the rewards for those who please Him and what are the punishments for those who disobey Him.

As per the Qur-aan's claim to be a clear guidance in these matters, we see evidence in its history as well. Throughout his mission, the Prophet completely and exclusively relied on the Qur-aan to do his job. He called people to Islam by reciting to them the Qur-aan; he answered the questions and responded to the attacks of the opponents by reciting to them the Qur-aan and he taught the excellence of conduct required of the believers by reciting to them the Qur-aan. He never had to explain to people what the message of the Qur-aan meant. In fact, the Qur-aan was revealed according to his mission's needs. Whatever needed to be told to any of the three groups, it was freshly revealed. The Prophet would recite those revelations to people as revealed. The verses revealed were in the language of the audience and were always related to the circumstances of the society and its needs. Thus no one ever had any difficulty in understanding either the context of the revelations or its meaning. Those who did not believe did so because they did not want to believe or they were not willing to agree to what was being proposed. No one ever complained that they did not believe because they did not understand the meanings or message of any of the text of the Qur-aan.

In fact, the Qur-aan was fully equipped to provide the guidance mentioned above and Allaah SWT would remind the disbelievers about this fact:

We have indeed equipped this Qur-aan with all pertinent contents best suited for advice and admonition. Is there, then, any who will take heed? (Al-Qamar 54:17, 22, 32 and 40)

This verse has been repeated four times in Soorah Al-Qamar (54:17, 22, 32 and 40). Usually, people translate it to connote "the Qur-aan is easy to understand". Granted that the word "Tayseer" used in the form "Yassarnaa" in this verse can mean "to make easy", but it implies "making easy" by providing all resources or furnishing whatever is needed to make something easy. For example, this word is used when a horse is well trained, fed and fully equipped with saddle and other accessories to make riding easy. Similarly, when a person is educated, trained and prepared for a leadership role or an important responsibility, he is said to have been

well-equipped for that role making the role easier (Tayseer). Accordingly, this word really means: to furnish something well, to equip with essentials or to prepare fully and suitably. Therefore, the verse means that the Qur-aan has been well-designed, well-composed and well-equipped with all the pertinent content and all of the best styles to provide advice, admonition and reminders to people about the right beliefs and lifestyle and the consequences of the wrong beliefs and lifestyle. If people do not heed its message, they will face destruction like their predecessors did. Thus, the proper meaning of this verse is:

We have indeed equipped this Qur-aan with all pertinent content best suited for advice and admonition. Is there, then, any who will take heed? (Al-Qamar 54:17, 22, 32 and 40)

There are two other verses where this has been used for the Qur-aan in the same context with the same meaning:

Thus have We equipped this Qur-aan with all befitting contents in your tongue (O Prophet) so that you may give good news thereby to the righteous and warn thereby a vehemently contentious people. ⁹⁸ And how many a people have We destroyed before! Do you see any of them living at all or hear from them the slightest sound? (Maryam 19:97-98)

We have thus equipped it with all befitting contents in your language (O Muḥammad) that they may heed. Therefore, wait; they, too, are waiting. (Ad-Dukhaan 44:58-59)

Thus, anyone who knows the literary Arabic language of the time of the Prophet and usages of words at that time should be able to understand the message of the Qur-aan and receive guidance. In fact, the basic guidance is clear even from the translations of the Qur-aan. That is why most of the people who convert to Islam nowadays do so because they happen to read a translation of the Qur-aan with an open mind.

The above comments pertain to the general guidance of Islamic beliefs and likes and dislikes of Allaah SWT. When a person wants to practise Islam, some additional knowledge is needed. To practice Manaasik (ritual acts of worship), a person needs to learn how they were practised by the Prophet. Those practices have been preserved by the constant and consistent practices of Muslims as well as documented in the authentic books. The knowledge essential for this purpose is brief and easily available.

Like any other branch of knowledge, for a deeper study and reflection on the Qur-aanic teachings, some other considerations have to be made. That is where we find people taking extreme positions. Muslims who have attended traditional Islamic schools usually claim that the Qur-aan is not easy to understand. Some even claim that one needs to have mastery in 35 sciences ('Uloom) before a person can understand the Qur-aan. On the other hand, some modernists claim that all you need to understand the Qur-aan is some knowledge of Arabic and a good Arabic dictionary. Obviously, the truth lies somewhere in between. If a person has a good command of the literary Arabic of the time of the Prophet, he can easily grasp the message of the Qur-aan if some basic principles are followed:

Firstly, the environment has changed and the context that was provided by the current dynamics of the society at the time of revelation is now not fully known to people; hence, some people claim that the Qur-aan is not understandable anymore to the general public without a research scholar explaining it. Although it may appear on the surface to be a valid point, in reality it is a doubt in the ability of Allaah and His Word to remain effective until the Day of Judgment.

The reality is that Allaah SWT took care of this in another way. To compensate for the loss of circumstantial context, Allaah SWT provided a textual context by arranging the revelations in an order that is totally different from the order in which they were revealed. Every verse, every section and every Soorah was put in a place specified by Allaah SWT so that each verse and section could be understood properly within the context provided by its placement. Had the Qur-aan been compiled in the order of the revelation of the verses, it would have been vital to document in detail the conditions and circumstance in which each verse was revealed to enable the subsequent generations properly understand it. Such documentation would have been an onerous and unwieldy task. Allaah SWT made it easier for subsequent generations to draw the right meaning of the verses by ensuring that the meaning fits within the context provided by its placement. ³ Thus, a student of the Qur-aan only needs to ensure that the meaning he draws from the words of the Qur-aan fits in the context in which it has been placed by Allaah SWT. Had that context not been important, Allaah SWT would have let the Qur-aan be compiled in any order that people chose.

The second factor that is essential in this respect is that Islamic concepts and terms were introduced and defined as needed. The Qur-aan, being the most concise prose that has ever existed, avoids repetition unless the point of guidance cannot be made without some repetition. Such necessary repetition occurs only in citing anecdotes and signs of Allaah SWT in different forms, styles and tones to help people gain guidance from them. Even in those repetitions, many details are not repeated, only some essential points, and even then to carry new nuances

not alluded to before. But it does not repeat its definitions and commands at all. So to understand Islamic concepts, terminology or historical stories, one must take into account all occurrences of that phrase, term, concept or anecdote used in the similar context throughout the Qur-aan.

There is one more factor to consider. Although the textual context is critical to determine the meaning of a verse or a set of verses, it does not provide the information about the timing of the commands when they were revealed. The timing is important because some important Islamic commands and standards of behaviour that Muslims need to adhere to were implemented gradually/in stages. The people at the time of the Prophet knew what the most recent applicable command was. The subsequent generations need to have enough knowledge about the timing of the revelation of those commands so that they know how the command progressed through stages and what was the final form and/or standard of the command. Timing of revelation is also important for those who want to understand the process of attaining the objectives of the Islamic movement by reflecting on the relevant guidance provided to the Islamic movement at its different phases and stages.

When the Qur-aan is approached, understood and reflected upon while abiding by the above mentioned principles and striving to live according to it, its wisdom and guidance is available to everyone who puts in sincere efforts. However, there are some self-inflicted impediments that the Muslims have erected between themselves and the understanding of the Qur-aan: a majority of Muslims do not know the Arabic language at all and have not invested enough time in learning about their Deen to be able to abide by the above-mentioned principles. Such people should use an authentic translation and Tafseer ensuring that the scholar who has written the translation and Tafseer has observed those principles.

The crucial point to remember is that it is the duty of every Muslim either to study and reflect on the message of the Qur-aan regularly on a daily basis either through an authentic book of Tafseer or through regular Qur-aanic studies sessions or directly, if capable, considering it to be the operating manual for our life on this earth. ⁴ If it is not done, the Qur-aan will complain to Allaah SWT of being abandoned and become an advocate against you on the Day of Judgment.

At the same time, Muslims must be aware of the two extremist tendencies that many Muslims harbour relative to approaching the Qur-aan for guidance. The first category of extremists are those who ask people not to study or discuss the Qur-aan without a scholar who has knowledge of a certain number of (something like 35) 'ulooms (sciences) explaining to them personally because they claim that no one can understand the Qur-aan without the knowledge of those sciences. These people are doing a terrible disservice to Islam and Muslims either because

they want to protect and increase the value of their adopted profession of being a “religious scholar” or because of their blind ignorance. This is the same old mentality and methodology that the Jewish and Christians scholars used to keep their monopoly on religious knowledge and edicts by keeping the Torah and the Gospel away from people, until the protestant movement encouraged people to read the Bible. These so-called guardians of Islam effectively cause Muslims to disconnect from the Qur-aan by discouraging them from approaching it. Even those Muslim who recite it regularly do not make any effort to understand the message because they think that it is beyond their capability and reach. This leads to ignorance in the Ummah of the essential Islamic teachings, spread of hearsay and unauthentic teachings and disregard of the Qur-aan as a book that should have a direct and profound impact on the day-to-day decisions and lifestyles of Muslims. This is one of the key reasons for the current deplorable condition of the Muslim Ummah.

However, the abovementioned comment can be valid for those scholars who specialize in Islamic jurisprudence. Naturally, the difference between the understanding of the Qur-aan for living Islamically and the specialization in jurisprudence is similar to the understanding of the laws and regulations to live normally as a citizen and the level of knowledge required for top-class lawyers and judges. It is also similar to the difference between a user using an operational manual for a piece of technology and the engineer specializing in the maintenance of that product.

The people on the other extreme are those treat the Qur-aan with a free-for-all approach. They think that any Muslim has an inalienable right to interpret the Qur-aan as he likes, to ascribe to it the meanings he deems fit without any regard to any principles, rules or guidelines. They do not even respect the basic rules that a civilized society uses for interpreting or ascribing meaning to another person’s writings or words. Usually, such people do not seek guidance from the Qur-aan, rather mostly they read into the Qur-aan their own ideas, preconceived notions or what they like from the society they are living in. They usually deduce their favourite meaning from the words of the Qur-aan by resorting to the unusual meanings of the Qur-aanic words or when that is not possible, just calling the words to be figurative, while totally disregarding the context of the words and verses. Obviously, instead of being guided by the Qur-aan, they attain misguidance because they often infer from the Qur-aan such meanings that are totally foreign to the Qur-aan. A more detailed discussion on such deviant approaches and the misguidance caused by them is contained in a series of articles at:

<http://ayubhamid.com/reflections/qur-aan>

[1] The expression “what is in the breasts” proverbially refers to mental and psychological matters.

[2] “Everything” that is pertinent to proper human relationship with Allaah, including the guidance in terms of how He wants people to behave.

[3] For detailed discussion on the textual order of the Qur-aan, see author’s article: [Studyin
g the Qur-aan in the Right Manner](#)

[4] <http://ayubhamid.com/reflections/qur-aan/approach-a-mindset/332-an-operating-manual>