STRATEGIES INFERRED FROM NAHJ AL-BALAGHA TO UNDERSTAND AND INTERPRET QURAN

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ABSTRACT

Strategic thoughts in understanding Quran are theoretical bases that convey the reasons and theoretical origins of the solutions and processes of understanding and interpreting Quran, and have a key role in specifying them. The four main strategic thoughts found in Nahj Al-Balagheh include holiness of Quran, its multimodality, its eloquence, and the need for its interpretation. The holiness of Quran regards its transcendental freedom from fault and mistake. This feature emphasized the two key points of being transcendental and Quran’s freedom from fault and mistake. Nahj Al-Balagheh’s mention of multimodality of Quran does not intend multiple interpretations and understandings, but rather, it regards semantic and pathological dimensions. Acceptance of the semantic dimension and rejection of the pathological one is performed based on a systematic method and with regard to traditional, intellectual, and literary principles and indications. The basis of the eloquence of Quran is also rooted in evidences from Nahj Al-Balagheh that consider Quran’s intention to communicate and convey its concepts and knowledge to its audience. Despite the Positivistic stance, these transmitted concepts and knowledge are meaningful and illuminating, and enjoy exoteric authority through indications.

KEY WORDS:
strategic thought, understanding Quran, exegesis bases, Nahj Al-Balagheh, the Prophet’s Family (Peace Be Upon Them)

INTRODUCTION

Strategies of understanding and interpreting Quran can be considered as the identification of the fundamental thoughts in understanding and interpreting Quran. In the present study, these strategies rely on the Nahj Al-Balagheh teachings. From the viewpoint of the present writer, strategy is the capability to adjust the perceptivedata, and is a procedure to attain specific objectives. Therefore, strategies of understanding and interpretation is defined as knowing and adjusting a sphere of fundamental thoughts and major bases in understanding and interpretation. As the definition reveals, one of the indicators of strategy is its systematicity and its capability to accommodate its components and subsets. In fact, strategy is a roadmap which delineates the major orientations. Anyway, by reliance on the Nahj Al-Balagheh teachings, we can infer and derive three strategic thoughts in understanding Quran. Each of these bases, however, includes other branches. These branches, too, play a role in understanding and interpreting Quran.

The holiness of Quran

One of the essential indices that helps one believe a book or text is the degree of its veracity and accuracy. As the text’s faults increase and the challenges against it are augmented, the exegete or reader’s approach in analyzing it or believing its contents will become feebleer. The importance of this point enhances when the focus turns to the Holy Scriptures, since they enjoy important roles and a high status. Indeed, Holy Scriptures are the paramount source of knowledge in theology and religiousness. In the same line, the ultimate bliss and salvation of humankind lies in the divine and revealed teachings. However, in the false viewpoints of many 18th century European rationalists, all founders of religious schools have only been frauds who have used the connection with revelation as a means of attaining their own goals and benefits. Some other Western thinkers, while emphasizing the honesty of the Holy Prophet of Islam, note that His Holiness has undoubtedly believed that he was receiving messages from a sublime source, but his honesty is not a ground for righteousness of his perceptions (Yusefiyan, 2004, p. 133). It is for sure that this philosophy route calls the infallibility of the Holy Scriptures into question, and doubts their Holiness, veracity, and divinity.

In the definition of Quran’s holiness, two principles are observed: Quran’s transcendentalness and its freedom from fault and mistake. These two principles are examined in Nahj Al-Balagheh as following.
Quran’s transcendentalness and revealededness

In different parts of Nahj Al-Balagheh, Quran is attributed to God, not to the Holy Prophet or the Gabriel. In other words, the origin of revelation and the Noble Quran’s verses are the Word of God, not the words of the Revelation Angel nor the experience and ecstatic state of the Holy Prophet.

In the 198th sermon of NahjAl-Balagheh, we observe that, “Then, Allah sent to him [the Holy Prophet (PBUH)] the Book as a light whose flames cannot be extinguished, a lamp whose gleam does not die, a sea whose depth cannot be sounded...” (Nahj Al-Balagheh, sermon 198). The appearance of the sermon connotes that the Noble Quran is a fact that has been revealed by God to the Holy Prophet. In other words, descending of the revelation and the Book is a phenomenon whose agent is God and whose addressee is the Holy Prophet. In this process, the Holy Prophet has no role in production of the revelation, but rather, he has only the role of trustily receiving and delivering the revealed message to the people.

It is worth noting that the appearance of an utterance in attributive and verbal formats as well as verbs such as “descended”, “said”, “says”, and “delineated”, all connote that Speech and Word are all from God and are attributed to him, and any understanding or interpretation that is against appearance needs indication as evidence. This is similar to the cases where the appearance of the utterances like “the Holy Prophet said” or “the Holy Prophet delineated” connote that they are uttered by the Holy Prophet, and any understanding contradicting the appearance of the utterances is false unless an indication or reason is provided. The endorsing point is that besides the conventional rules, the fundamental rules have also underpinned this issue (Mozaffar, 1991, p. 27). Moreover, in the 173rd sermon of Nahj Al-Balagheh, Imam Ali introduces the Holy Prophet (PBUH) as the “trustee of revelation” who has shown ultimate trusteeship toward the divine verses, “The Prophet is the trustee of Allah’s revelation, the Last of His Prophets. The giver of tidings of His mercy ...” (Nahj Al-Balagheh, sermon 173). The phrase “the trustee of Allah’s revelation” is used to reveal that revelation has been issued by God, and the Holy Prophet has had no role in its production, but rather, he has only been a trustee in receiving the divine deposit.

Infallibility and inviolability of Quran

One of the evidences that attest the freedom of Quran from mistake and fault is a sermon by Imam Ali in which, His Holiness puts forth the necessity of referring the affairs to Quran. He says, “I am the contesteer against those who break away from Faith and the opposer of those who entertain doubts. [My argument is that] uncertainties [such as accusing me of being an accomplice in the murder of Othman] should be placed before Qur'an, the Book of Allah (for clarification). Certainly, people will be recompensed according to what they have in their hearts.” (Nahj Al-Balagheh, sermon 75). The necessity of referring the affairs to Quran in order to disclose the truth can be an indication of Quran’s infallibility, because if a phenomenon has the capacity to be considered as the verification criterion and touchstone of different affairs, then it should certainly be free from mistake, incorrectness, and perversity. Otherwise, a book that entails faults and falsities is not capable of being the criterion of right and wrong. In other words, Imam Ali (PBUH) considers Quran as having the capacity to be the indicator of right from wrong and proper from improper, and a source that in its evaluation of affairs, judges rightly and properly, and does not go wrong nor deviates. Even if only a part of Quran suffered from mistakes and faults, then it could not have the aforementioned evaluation validity. Besides, in the language of traditions, contradiction of an affair with Quran is considered as that affair’s invalidation and leads to its abandonment. This reveals that Quran is free from mistake and fault. Furthermore, the absoluteness of these traditions can also imply that Quran is timeless and placeless (i.e. not confined to a specific period of time or a specific place) (Purroostami, 2009, p. 97).Thus, based on the foregoing evidences, we can conclude that a) the Noble Quran is the reference of and criterion for differentiating right from wrong, and b) for any phenomenon to be so, it should be free from incorrectness, fault, and mistake. Therefore, Quran is free from fault and mistake.

Multimodality of quran

There are some traditions in the Islamic resources that proclaim the multimodality of Quran or convey that Quran can be paraphrased in different ways. One of those traditions is the 77th sermon of Nahj Al-Balagheh, which states that sending Ibn Abbas to debate with Kharijites, Imam Ali advises him not to debate using Quran, since Quran is multimodal and has multiple possible meanings. Then, Imam offers Ibn Abbas the traditions as an essential strategy and approach for debate and argumentation.

In the present writer’s eyes, the intention of the phrase “could be paraphrased in various ways” in the 77th sermon is that Quran, regarding beings an not beings, is capable of being paraphrased into different meanings, and it is possible to present different understandings (either right or wrong) from its texts. In the light of such a quality in Quran and the personality of the opposite party (i.e. Kharijites), Imam Ali (PBUH) advises Ibn Abbas to debate and argue with them using the traditions of the Holy Prophet. However, concerning doe’s and don’ts, it is incumbent upon the exegete to use all exegetical principles and indications in a systematic method and disclose all true modes and layers of meaning so as to be able to avoid the false and pseudo-true meanings. In other words, the Noble Quran entails various modes and layers of meaning that can be categorized into semantic and pathological dimensions. In the utterance “[the passages of this Book] could be paraphrased in various ways, [those that] you say and [those that] they say”, the phrase “[those that] you say” regards the semantic dimension, that is, the true modes of meaning that the right party (here, Ibn Abbas) presents. In contrast, the phrase “[those that] they say” can concern the pathological dimension, that is, the wrong modes of meaning that are provided by the wrong party (here, Kharijites).

In fact, the pathological dimension deals with the wrong and incorrect modes and meanings that are attributed to Quranic verses. This dimension reveals that Quran can be
attributed incorrect interpretations, and in case the principles and indications of understanding are neglected, either deliberately or ignorantly, the deviation of understanding and interpretation and ultimately, deviation in the Quranic knowledge would be inevitable. Narrations which regard “subjective interpretation of Quranic texts” (Tabari, 1392 AH, p. 27) and the incorrect understandings of the Quranic verses by deviated people including the Deviators (Muaviah and his adherents) and Mareqin (Khajrjjites) consider this meaning and approach.

Based on the foregoing discussion, multimodality of Quran does not mean multiple understandings and interpretations of the text in the way that the West deems (philosophical hermeneutics), but rather, it regards semantic and pathological dimensions. The acceptance of the former and rejection of the latter is done based on a systematic method using traditional, intellectual, and literary principles and indications.

Quran’s eloquence

The issue of Quran’s eloquence is among the strategic thoughts in understanding the religion and the Holy Quran, which is capable of discussing such important topics as Quran’s meaningfulness and illumination as well as the authority and semantic validity of its verses. In other words, if we take the conceptual and implicational speech to mean that the Quranic verses are practical and authoritative and intend to deliver meaning and knowledge to its audience, then this stance would be an effective step in consolidating the fundamental thoughts in understanding Quran. In fact, this can provide an elucidation response to the theory which contends that religious statements are meaningless and non-illuminating. This latter theory considers religious and Quranic statements as non-illuminating and void of a real external endorsement, and insists on its symbolic or mythical concept (Sajedi, 2006, p. 125). Some Western theologians such as Wittgenstein, Paul Van Buren, and D. C. Philips – including both proponents and opponents of Logical Positivism –, who have a common belief in non-illuminating nature of the religious speech and religious statements, consider these statements as non-illuminating and unexpressive about reality. This discussion shows the importance of examining the role that Quranic speech plays in understanding the religion.

If we observe that the Quran’s eloquence has been mentioned in the traditional teachings as an appellation for Quran, this means that the Noble Quran conveys its meaning and intention to its audience, and that this meaning and intention is understandable and inferable from the Quran. This consequently denotes that the text of this holy book is not meaningless and does not have just a symbolic aspect. Moreover, if a phenomenon, such as a picture, can easily convey its messages and concepts to its audience due to its specific artistic features, we would say that this picture is “speaking with us”. In the same manner, the phenomena and wonders of the world “speak” with people in a way and inform them of the existence of an All-Glorious and All-Wise creator. Nahj Al-Balaghhe says in this regard, “He showed us the realm of His Might, and such wonders which speak of His Wisdom.” (Nahj Al-Balaghhe, sermon 91). Indeed, this speaking is an authoritative one by God through the Book of creation (i.e. the physical world). In other words, the world’s phenomena and its wonders are telling us about the transcendental wisdom of God and refer to His infinite glory and power.

The foregoing discussion is true about written documents and manuscripts. This is because every written document implies a certain intention and concept. IbnMeithanBahrani says in this regard, “the written statement delivers the message to the audience, as does the speaking individual” (IbnMeitham, 1983, p. 154).

So, as the Most-high God’s Book of creation (i.e. the physical world and its phenomena) is capable of speaking, and talks about the power, wisdom, and other signs of the Creator of the universe, the Composed book of the Most-high God (i.e. the Noble Quran) is also eloquent and talks for people about God’s will and programs and guides them. Therefore, authoritative speech is a concept based on this exegetic basis, in which a kind of pseudo-real and meaningful concept and knowledge deliverance happens. This deliverance enjoys a real external endorsement, not a symbolic or mythical one.

In the 169th sermon of Nahj Al-Balaghhe, Imam Ali says, “There is no doubt that Allah sent down the Prophet as a guide [for humankind] with an eloquent Book [the Noble Quran which clearly distinguishes the right from the wrong] and a standing command [religion]. No one will be ruined by it except one who ruins himself.” The meaning of this utterance is that the Noble Quran is a book that implies its knowledge and delivers it to people; it is not a book that provides meaningless, non-authoritative, or reference-free implications about its knowledge and facts. As we noted in the foregoing discussion of terminology, one of the meanings of speech1 is specification and clarity. That is, if a meaning or concept can be understood from something, the adjective “eloquent” can be added to that thing, no matter if it is really talking or silent. Therefore, it is possible to define the term “eloquent Book” as the specifier, illuminating, and understandable. Comments byNahj Al-Balaghhe exegetes also follow the same route. In his commentary, Yahyâlbn Ibrahim Juhaf (died at 1102 AH) takes the word “eloquent”2 as a sign for Quran’s authoritiveness and its implication about its signified (Juhaf, 2001, p. 391).

Moreover, it is construed from the words of Qotb Al-Din Ravandi (the 6th century) that they have taken the intention of Imam to be the eloquence and wise implication of Quran about its own knowledge (despite its silent appearance) and consider it as a proof by God for people (Ravandi, 1985, p. 199).

CONCLUSION

All in all, four strategic and basic thoughts of a) holiness, b) multimodality, c) eloquence, an d) the need to interpret Quran are inferable from Nahj Al-Balaghhe teachings.

By Quran’s holiness, we mean its transcendental freedom from mistake and fault, which entails two basic principles of being transcendental and impeccable. All expressive
forms in Nahj Al-Balagheh (verbal, genitive, and imperative) imply that Quranic verses are divine and transcendental.

By multimodality of Quran we mean that the Noble Quran is capable of being paraphrased into different modes and meanings in both semantic and pathological dimensions. The first dimension is the result of a systematic interpretation and so, is acceptable. The second dimensions results from subjective interpretation of the Quranic texts and so, is rejected. In other words, the Noble Quran entails different layers and modes of meaning that might be developed in either positive or negative dimensions. In the utterance, “[the passages of this Book] could be paraphrased in various ways, [those that] you say and [those that] they say”, the phrase “[those that] you say” regards the semantic dimension, that is, the true modes of meaning that the right party (here, Ibn Abbas) presents. In contrast, the phrase “[those that] they say” can concern the pathological dimension, that is, the wrong modes of meaning that are provided by the wrong party (here, Kharijites). Meanwhile, although there are some commonalities between multimodality issue and the Western Hermeneutics, however the reliance of Shi’a on intellectual and traditional principles and strong indications in understanding the text has led to major differences with multiple understandings. Quran’s eloquence is presented as its communicativeness and implication about its own meanings and concepts, for the reason that based on the literal and traditional indications, the inherent meaning of eloquence is “deliverance and presentation of the message and intention”. This message and intention may be delivered through sensory mechanisms like voices and sounds (concrete eloquence) or through intellectual mechanisms (intellectual eloquence). The difference is that in intellectual eloquence, the only means of communication is thinking and reflection, and there is no place for such material means as voice and sound. The need to interpret Quran was the last basis discussed in this article. This considered the full and true understanding of Quran dependent upon using teachings of the Family of the Holy Prophet (PBUT), and declared that the consequence of detachment from the Family of the Holy Prophet would be deviation.

Resources


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