**The Qur’an and Scientific Discoveries**

**Question: Right after any scientific discovery or invention, it is expressed that there are certain allusions to it in the Qur’an. From this perspective, what should be researchers’ general attitude toward the scientific truths in the Qur’an? What is the message such verses convey particularly to those who study natural sciences?**

**Answer:** The Qur’an and the universe are two different books of God Almighty. Therefore, it is inconceivable for them to contradict one another. The Qur’an, the Miraculous Exposition, is a manifestation of Divine Speech; it is an eternal interpreter, an expounder, and a lucid proof of this Great Book of the Universe, which is a manifestation of Divine Power. The Qur’an expounds the Book of Universe, and thus the universe gains light with it. In other words, the Qur’an proclaims the principles prevalent in creation, Divine mysteries, and Divine disposals.

Since the Qur’an expounds and interprets the universe as the word of the Almighty, it contains allusions to certain sciences exploring natural phenomena. For this reason, from very early on scholars have studied the verses alluding to scientific truths, along with those on faith, worship, and morality, and have expressed different considerations on their meanings and implications. For example, when you consider the interpretation of certain verses by Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, who lived in the fourth century of Hijra, it will be seen that his commentaries are very close to scientific findings in our time, in spite of living eleven hundred years ago. The conclusions dra wn and commentaries made by this great interpreter of the Qur’an are far beyond the scientific level of his age. For example, with respect to verse 22 of Surah al-Hijr which means, “And We send the winds to fertilize…,” Ibn Jarir expounds upon the role of winds at fertilizing seeds. The interesting fact here is that, at a very early time when nobody knew about positive and negative charges of clouds, he points to the fact that this verse alludes to the fertilization of clouds by winds, which paves the way for rainfall.

It was not only Ibn Jarir, but other scholars as well, who made many remarkable commentaries and conclusions about the verses concerning the “creative commands” (the laws of God’s creation and maintenance of the universe and the laws He has established for life). However, until the last century or two, this issue was not taken as a separate branch of study. Toward the contemporary age—in a way with the influence of the positivist understanding of the time—more emphasis began to be laid on this issue. For example, Muhammad Abduh, who interpreted the Qur’an until the Surah Yusuf in fifteen volumes, also made some modern commentaries about verses related to scientific facts. And Rashid Rida, one of his foremost students, corrected some points in his teacher’s work and completed the remaining chapters himself. However, there are certain mistaken commentaries that contradict the general acceptances of former Sunni scholars. For example, the final verse at the end of the Surah al-Fil (105:5) meaning, “And so He rendered them like a field of grain devoured,” is explained with a commentary that the relevant army was destroyed by the smallpox virus brought by the birds. In fact, the metaphor of devoured grains here describes how the bodies of the soldiers were pierced like leaves eaten by insects. Shortly after this interpretation was published, the scholar Tantawi wrote an interpretation entitled, Al-Jawahir, in which he explained Qur’anic verses from the perspective of developments in science. Even though the desired profundity is not maintained throughout this work, he tried to explain many verses under the light of the findings of modern science. However, other interpreters of the Qur’an saw his work more as an encyclopedia than an exegesis. The late Said Hawwa also made efforts in this direction. As a result, studies and efforts by many scholars led to a new era in the name of scientific interpretation of the Qur’an, and a great deal of studies have been carried out in Turkey and several Arab countries.

**For example, Zaglul al-Najjar, who I followed on a Saudi television channel for a long time, is a person with important studies in this field. This valuable scholar is both deeply knowledgeable about the Qur’an and is an academic with high scientific achievements; he knows his field well and is able to explain scientific matters after scrutinizing them in meticulous detail. As for Bediüzzaman, he did not go into great detail on this subject in his works, but sufficed with explaining certain verses that were challenged, such as how Moses struck a rock and made water gush from it and how Prophet Solomon had the Queen of Sheba’s throne teleported. But one thing that he highlighted was that the miracles of the Prophets mark the furthest horizons sciences can reach and encourage people to explore. In my opinion, this is an extremely significant remark and an approach to be considered seriously.**

The Place of Scientific Inventions within the General Purposes of the Qur’an

As for how often scientific discoveries and inventions are mentioned in the Qur’an, Bediüzzaman’s approach tells us that the verses of the Qur’an mention everything in accordance with their ranking among the general purposes of the Qur’an. When the Qur’an, the Miraculous Exposition, is viewed with a holistic perspective, it will be seen that it shows humanity the ways to eternal bliss by primarily expounding on the pillars of faith and religion. At the same time, it provides happiness in this world by making the necessary regulations about the individual and society. Namely, the Qur’an gives priority to the crucial matters that are necessary for humanity’s happiness in both worlds. When the issue is seen from this perspective, it will be clear that the matters related to scientific discoveries and inventions are of a secondary importance in comparison to these crucial issues raised in the Qur’an. Furthermore, the Qur’an is not a scripture that is addressed to scientists exclusively. On the contrary, it addresses the whole of humanity. Therefore, as its contents are addressed to everyone, the style it uses allows everyone to receive a message. If the Qur’an had explained matters in accordance with the horizons of scientific experts, whose number do not even amount to five percent of humanity, ninety-five percent of humanity would not be able to benefit from it.

Inferiority Complex and Overstated Commentaries

On the other hand, while commenting on verses related to scientific truths, it is a mistaken attitude to blow things out of proportion and seek fantasy, attaching irrelevant things to the Qur’an with an ambition to make scientific commentaries. Additionally, attempting to test the Qur’an through knowledge presented by natural sciences is a great disrespect against the Word of God. Pretending that issues of science and technology are essential and trying to fit the explanation of the Qur’an to them in some way, and taking every scientific discovery and development as a base and trying to support them with Qur’anic verses by pushing the limits of obvious religious truths is an approach of great disrespect toward God’s Word. Moreover, the Qur’an alludes to different scientific matters in its own style. It uses a style that addresses both the understandings of its contemporaries and the people of our age, when science has made a great deal of progress. In other words, although the verses of the Qur’an made perfect sense to the people of the Prophetic period, they do not contradict at all the scientific truths of our time. To give an example, chapters in the Qur’an such as al-Hajj, al-Mu’minun, and al-Mursalat openly tell about the phases an embryo passes through in the womb. As the people of those days read these verses and benefited from them as far as their horizons allowed, the gynecologists of our time cannot help but be fascinated by the truths revealed about embryonic development in the Qur’an.

There is another issue that requires us to be careful about: While interpreting verses of the Qur’an and sayings of the noble Prophet under the light of scientific developments, we need to present matters with alternatives, or at least keep in mind that there can be other meanings pointed out or alluded to by these verses, leaving the door open for other possibilities and never sealing the issue. Particularly, if research is being conducted in a new field and on a different subject, making decisive judgments about the interpretation of verses before matters gain clarity can lead to serious mistakes. In addition, it is absolutely necessary to refer to earlier studies and know about the commentaries about the issue in basic reference sources of Qur’anic interpretation from past to present.

Underlining one more issue can be beneficial here: Scholars that deal with Qur’anic interpretation must be experts in several different fields. For example, they need to know the Arabic language very well, together with disciplines of Tafsir (the Qur’anic Exegesis), Hadith studies, Fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudence), Usul at-Tafsir (the Methodology of the Qur’anic Exegesis), and Usul ad-Din (Theology). In addition to knowing these, they must have sufficient knowledge to understand the scientific explanations. Likewise, a researcher must have adequate knowledge of religious disciplines in addition to knowing his own scientific field profoundly, if truth is to be reached. Unfortunately in our time, these two fields advance along separate paths. We see that an expert of natural sciences knows the depths of his own field but does not know very much about religion. I would like to clarify the point I am trying to make by saying, “does not know”: Knowing basic facts about religious practices does not mean knowing religion. Even if a person learns by heart Imam Bukhari’s collection of the Prophet’s sayings, this does not mean that he knows religion. Memorizing the entire Qur’an is not sufficient to have a saying in this field either, because, in addition to committing the sayings of the Prophet and verses of the Qur’an to one’s memory, it is necessary to know the disciplines of religious methodology in order to understand Divine purposes correctly.

Believing Hearts Burning to Discover

Today, Western scientists are meticulously studying the existence with the researches they conduct. One cannot help admire their boldness and efforts in exploring. However, since most of them have not discovered the true identity of the Prophet and his teachings, they interpret everything within the narrow dimensions of material objects and happenings. For this reason, the systems they establish are bound by materialism, positivism, or naturalism. In other words, the extent allowed by these systems—which see matter as everything—restricts the horizons of a researcher from the West. As researchers on the history of science and philosophy insistently emphasize, until the fifth century of Hegira when Muslims lived their renaissance, Muslim scientists made staggering scientific advancements. At a time when many such matters were not even discussed in the West, they conducted serious research, leading to discoveries in medicine, geometry, astronomy, and more bitter fact is that after the fifth century of Hijra, Muslims gave up their scientific pursuits for about ten centuries and the West took the flag, carrying it further. When this happened, the Western scientists were the ones who set the framework of the present system. Since they established the system in their own way, they evaluated the existence through their own understandings. However, reason alone has its limits with respect to perceiving the truth. Reason can only take one to a certain extent and can only explain the issues of research to a certain degree. There are such matters that cannot be understood without using Divine revelation as the touchstone; revelation must have the final say in all fields, including science.”

To reiterate, in the fields of science and research the spirit and the metaphysical must be considered along with the physical. Only with such a balance can you correctly see and evaluate the things that you study by telescopes, microscopes, and x-rays. These expressions should not be misunderstood. We do not adopt an approach that condemns everything discovered by the West. Since the power of reasoning also given to humanity is a wisdom, there are many correct things stated by basing them on reason but all of the theories that have been developed by only taking physical matter into consideration must undergo a critical revision, distinguishing what is right with them and what is wrong. And this necessarily depends on considering natural and social sciences from the perspective of the Qur’an and Islamic faith. And only those who understand the Qur’an correctly will achieve this.

At this point, some Muslims talk about transferring or “Islamizing” knowledge. I think this is a defective approach that cannot lead to the proper conclusion; it is like putting on a borrowed shirt. Instead, we must evaluate issues together with their fundamental principles and re-examine the present sciences with the united perspective of sound reason, reliable senses, as well as authenticated knowledge from Divine sources. Using this criterion, Muslims must then come up with their own truths. Success in this regard depends upon raising individuals thirsty for truth, knowledge, and discovery. If we are to write a real Qur’anic interpretation that appeals to the understanding of people of our time, we must first form a council of scholars with encyclopedic knowledge on all fields of sciences. This council must initially consider matters among themselves and then decide what is right or wrong by using the well established methodologies of the Qur’anic Exegesis and Theology. The interpretations and commentaries made only after the affirmation of such a collective consciousness must be included in religious literature. If such a council comprised of both experts on Islamic disciplines and natural and social sciences can be formed, then with the help of God, the consequent study of interpretation should be free from artificial commentaries seeking fantasy. It is our hope and expectation that the contemporary scientists whose hearts are firm in and content with faith come together and collaborate in order to form a Qur’anic interpretation of the desired level, so that Muslims will have, to some extent, paid part of the tribute they owe toward the Noble Qur’an.

This text is the translation of “Kur’an ve İlmî Keşifler”