

## CHAPTER 3 VERSE 7: THE LAW TO UNDERSTAND THE QUR'ÂN

“He (*i.e.* Allâh) it is Who has revealed the Book to you, some of its verses are *Muḥkamât* (absolutely clear and lucid, decisive); they are *Ummul-Kitâb* (the core of the original foundation of all revelation; the Essence of Allâh’s Will and Law. The basis of the Book and also its protector, hence the ‘*mother of the Book*’); and others are *Mutashâbihât* (allegorical). Then those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part of it, which is allegorical, seeking to mislead and seeking to give it (their own) interpretation. (What it means is that one is not searching for its hidden meanings). And *mâya’lamu* (none can exhaust its): *ta’wîlahu ’illallâh* (*ta’wîlahu* = the discovering, detecting, revealing, developing or disclosing or the explaining, expounding or interpreting of which a thing is or may be reduced or that which it may come to be, [within the framework of the Qur’ânic teachings]), save Allâh. And those firmly rooted in knowledge, they say - ‘We believe in it, it is all from our *Rabb*\*. And none will grasp the message except people of understanding.’ (Al-Qur’ân 3:7)

(\*According to Ar-Râghib al-Isfahânî, *Rabb* means ‘to nurture a thing in such a manner as to make it attain one condition after another until its goal of completion’ Mufradât alfâz al-Qur’ân by ar-Râghib al-Isfahânî. Please note that the word has different meanings when it does not refer to the Creator). ( Refer also to Qur’an chapter 87:verses 1-3)

(I) The *first* part of the verse states:

“He it is (*i.e.* Allâh) Who has revealed the Book to you.”

This is true and cannot be disputed, as Allâh is the only One “Who knows *as-sir* (literally, it means: *The secret*, and in the Qur’ânic technical sense, the order and the functions of the unknown and known of creation) of the *samâwât* (the entire universe excluding the earth) and the earth.” (Al-Qur’ân 25:6.)

(II) The *second* part of the verse states:

“Some of its verses are *Muḥkamât* (absolutely clear and lucid, decisive); they are *Ummul-Kitâb* (the core of the original foundation of all revelation; the Essence of Allâh’s Will and Law. Furthermore, it means the basis of the Book and also its protector, hence the ‘*mother of the Book*’).”

(i) An important point to note is that the verses in the Arabic Glorious Qur’ân are categorised as being of two types: The *Muḥkamât* and the *Mutashâbihât* verses. The above part of the verse refers to the *Muḥkamât* verses as *Ummul-Kitâb*, which literally means the ‘*mother of the Book*’. This implies that they are in fact functioning as the protectors of the entire Book.

NB. Since the term ‘mother’ and not “mothers” is used, some argue that the phrase ‘mother of the Book’ does not refer to every *Muḥkamât* verse.<sup>1</sup> This is not correct. Firstly, the verse uses the pronoun “they” and not “it”, thus all the *Muḥkamât* are referred to. Secondly, “mother” in this verse is a collective term referring to all the verses and should not be seen as a singular word. The complete statement clearly conveys the message that all the *Muḥkamât* verses provide the necessary protection to safeguard the true rational meaning of the entire Book.

**(ii) The meaning of the Arabic word *Muḥkamât*:**

The Arabic word *Muḥkam* originates from its root word *Hakama* that literally means: he prevented, restrained or withheld. *Aḥkama*, a word derived from *Hakama*, means: “made or rendered a thing firm or stable”, “doing that which is desired” or “preventing wrong doings”. The root word *Hakama* further implies that a thing is so protected that nothing can pervert or break it or interfere with it. Some infinitive verbs derived from *Hakama* are: *al-ihkâm* (= to make precise, to confirm, to strengthen), *at-tahkîm* (= to arbitrate) and *al-ḥukm* (= to judge)...”<sup>2</sup> *Muḥkam* could be like a building, made or rendered, firm, stable, strong, solid, compact, etc.; held to be secure, from falling to pieces.

**(iii) The meaning of “*Muḥkamât* verses”:**

Tabarî sees the *Muḥkamât* verses as “Messages that are clear in and by themselves.” (*The Message of The Qur’ân by Muhammad Asad, see his footnote 5 on page 66, 1980 Edition; Dar Al-Andalus*)

So by their very nature these verses (i.e., *Muḥkamât* verses) are secured from misinterpretation. In layman’s terms the *Muḥkamât* (decisive) verses contain information that ought to be easily understood by the ordinary thinking individual. They are *consistent* with the Law, the nature and the order of creation. They form the foundation on which the understanding of the rest of the Qur’ân is based and thus are decisive in character. The word ‘*decisive*’ is the adjective of the noun “decision” which means:

**“Decision, *di-sizh’en*, n. the act or product of deciding: settlement: judgment: the quality of being decided in character. - *Adj.* decisive (*-sis’iv*), having the power of deciding: showing decision: final: positive. -*Adv.*”**  
**(Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary).**

It is clear that no single English word is sufficient to convey all the properties of the *Muḥkamât* verses. Nevertheless, for all practical purposes “*Muḥkamât*” will henceforth be translated as “decisive”. When the *Muḥkamât* (decisive)

<sup>1</sup> : Textual Sources for the Study of Islam. Edited and Translated by Andrew Rippin and Jan Knappert. The University of Chicago Press 1986, p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> : Al-Mizan volume 5, p. 27.

verses are used as a *measuring stick* to uncover the meaning of the allegorical verses, a meaning in line with Divine wisdom emerges.

**(III) The *third* part of the verse states:**

“And others are *Mutashâbihât* (allegorical).”

**(i) The meaning of the Arabic word *Mutashâbih*:**

The word *Mutashâbih* is derived from its root word *Shibh* that means: Things like or resembling one another or *likeness* or *resemblance*, that *which is co-similar* [like each other] or *conformable in its various parts*. *Mutashâbihât* are therefore *things like or resembling one another*, hence *susceptible to different interpretations*.<sup>3</sup>

**(ii) The meaning that the adjective *Mutashâbih* confers upon its noun, viz. the verse:**

The verses referred to, as *Mutashâbih* is susceptible to different interpretations. The meaning of the verses is therefore not to be extracted solely on face value – but that it has to be evaluated with other *Muhkamât* (decisive) verses in order to derive its true message. The most appropriate English word for *Mutashâbihât*, although maybe not sufficient, is the term “*allegorical*”. It is derived from the word “*allegory*” which means:

“A figurative representation conveying a meaning other than and in addition to the literal. ...The etymological meaning of the word is wider than which it bears in actual use. An allegory is distinguished from a *metaphor* by being longer sustained and more fully carried out in its details, and from *analogy* by the fact that the one appeals to the imagination and the other to reason...” (The Encyclopædia Britannica, 14th edition 1929, Vol. 1, p. 645)

The *Mutashâbihât* verses are of different categories.

**(a) *The first category***

Those verses of which the meaning becomes known by using the clearly expressed guidance contained in the *Muhkamât* (decisive) verses. This is made clear from chapter 11:1: -

“... (This is) a Book, whose verses are characterised by *uhkimat* (wisdom), then they are made plain, from One Wise, Aware.”

**This is further supported in chapter 39:23:**

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<sup>3</sup> : Arabic-English Lexicon, by E. W. Lane, Vol. 1, op. cit., and Hans Wehr A dictionary of Modern Written Arabic by J Milton Cowan Fourth Edition.

“Allâh has revealed the best announcement, a Book *Mutashâbihâm-mathânî* (conformable in its various parts)...”

Therefore, the *Mutashâbihât* (allegorical) verses must not be seen in isolation, nor can a literal meaning be extracted from them without intense research and conferring them with the *Muhkamât* (decisive) verses contained in the Arabic Glorious Qur'ân, as all Qur'ânic verses are *consistent* and never in conflict with one another. It is important to remember that the literal translation of the phrase *Ummul-Kitâb* is ‘*mother of the book*’. Hence, the *Muhkamât* (decisive) verses should be regarded as protectors and supporters for the meaning of the *Mutashâbihât* (allegorical) verses. The *Muhkamât* (decisive) verses thus act as controllers against misconstruing information about creation. The combination of the *Muhkamât* (decisive) and the *Mutashâbihât* (allegorical and those of which the knowledge are not yet uncovered) verses contains the necessary guidance that provides the “*stimuli*” for research. They are the criteria against which humankind’s findings must be judged to ensure that interpretations of these findings are in accordance with Allâh’s laws. This is supported in the Arabic Glorious Qur'ân as follows:

“Then surely it is for Us (i.e. Allâh) to make it clear to you.” (Al-Qur'ân 75:19)

Allâh Himself has arranged the verses and the chapters into one Book. He has formulated the Arabic Glorious Qur'ân in a manner that will enable us to extract most of the meaning from the Book itself.

*(b) The second category*

Those verses that refer to an intangible subject for example: Allâh or an object (Hereafter). An example of a verse referring to an intangible subject - the “*Being*” of Allâh:

“Vision comprehends Him (i.e. Allâh) not, and He (i.e. Allâh) comprehends (all) vision; and He (i.e. Allâh) is above all comprehension, the aware.” (Al-Qur'ân 6:104) (refer also to 50/16; 112/1-4; 2/186; 2/255)

“There is nothing like unto Him (i.e. Allâh)” (Al-Qur'ân 42:11)

This makes it absolutely clear that Allâh is beyond humankind’s visionary ability to comprehend Him. The ‘1926’ “Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle”, as conveyed in the quote below, supports the notion that if something cannot be observed experimentally, it does not necessarily imply that it is non-existent.

“...*No physical measurements can tell you that there is an electron on this table and that it is also lying still. Experiments can be made to discover where the electron is; these experiments will then destroy any possibility of finding simultaneously whether the electron is moving and if so at what speed. And conversely*

there is an inherent limitation on our knowledge, which appears to have been decreed “in the nature of things”” [*our emphasis*]. (Al-Tawhid Vol. IV, No. 4, July-September 1987, p. 66. Concerning The ‘1926’ “Heisenberg’s (1901-76, German physicist) Uncertainty Principle”. )

The above-mentioned verses are of such a nature that the subject/object cannot be explained in tangible terms. However, an understanding of these *Mutashâbihât* (allegorical) verses, in consonance with the general understanding of the *Muhkamât* (decisive) verses of the Arabic Glorious Qur’ân, can emerge if the *Muhkamât* (decisive) verses are properly applied. What should be understood is the fact that a Muslim bears witness to the fact that Allâh exists. The basis, on which the witnessing is based, is the fact that Allâh’s creation is subjected to an order. Consequently, human beings know that *order* is planned, but the One who is responsible for the order of creation is not tangible. The *Order* or *Nature* of creation and the revelation of the *unknown* in the Arabic Glorious Qur’ân are the basis on which our witnessing of the Creator is established. Hence, when a Muslim performs the call to prayer and says: “*Ash-hadu an lâ ilâha ill-Allâh*” i.e. I bear witness that nothing deserves to be worshipped except Allâh. What it means is the confirmation of a Muslim’s witnessing, which is based on the fact that human beings cannot reveal the *unknown*, which we find in the Arabic Glorious Qur’ân. Furthermore, the entire creation is in conformity with the nature and order in which Allâh has created it. We find no incongruity with natural facts and the revelation in the Arabic Qur’ân.

**TO SUMMARISE:**

The important point to remember is that any verse of the Arabic Glorious Qur’ân, which seems to defy factual knowledge of the universe, must be interpreted in the context of the guidance of the *Muhkamât* (decisive) verses. Thus one has to be able to distinguish between *allegorical* and *decisive* verses.

(d) The *fourth* part of verse 3:7,

“Then those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part of it which is allegorical, seeking to mislead and seeking to give it (their own) interpretation. (Meaning, not searching for its hidden meanings which are to be found in the decisive verses)”, clearly brings home the fact that the *allegorical* verses should not be taken literally. If one follows the *allegorical* verses without looking for confirmation of the interpreted meanings within the *decisive* verses, then one will be committing sin. A consequence of this sin would be retardation of one’s understanding of the Arabic Glorious Qur’ân. A penance for rejecting the guidance from Allâh. This is made clear:

“Our *Rabb*, make not our hearts to deviate *after Thou* (i.e. Allâh) *has guided us* and grant us mercy from Thee (i.e. Allâh); surely Thou (i.e. Allâh) art the most liberal Giver.” (Al-Qur’ân 3: 8)

(e) The last part of the verse holds very important information, which we need to analyse: “And *mâya‘lamu* (none can exhaust its): *ta’wîlahu ‘illallâh* (*ta’wîlahu* = the discovering, detecting, revealing, developing or disclosing or the explaining, expounding or interpreting of which a thing is or may be reduced or that which it may come to be, [within the framework of the Qur’ânic teachings]), save Allâh. And those firmly rooted in knowledge, they say, ‘We believe in it, it is all from our *Rabb*. And none will grasp the message except people of understanding.’”

It is very important that we take note of the meaning of the words *mâya‘lamu*, as most translate it as “*none knows*” and not as “*none can exhaust its*”. The words “*none knows*” are problematic, as there are some *allegorical* verses which the meaning is known. To know the meaning of some verses is not the point. What is of importance is that no one has the capacity of knowledge to be on par with the knowledge of Almighty Allâh. Hence, it is not possible for anyone to exhaust the ‘*ta’wîlahu*’ of the Arabic Glorious Qur’ân. What does it mean? It means that the inner secrets of creation are so vast that no one will ever be able to uncover everything about it in his or her lifetime. There is simply too much to know. Hence, we have translated the words ‘*mâya‘lamu*’ as *none can exhaust its ‘ta’wîlahu ‘illallâh’* which means:

“The discovering, detecting, revealing, developing or disclosing or the explaining, expounding or interpreting of which a thing is or may be reduced or that which it may come to be, within the framework of the Qur’ânic teachings), save Allâh.”

*The words:* “And those firmly rooted in knowledge, they say, ‘we believe in it, it is all from our *Rabb*. And none will grasp the message except people of understanding.”

This means that as one progresses in uncovering the *truth* of the contents in the Arabic Glorious Qur’ân, the *truth* forces one to say: ‘We believe in it.’ Only those who have uncovered the *truth*, i.e. by the acquisition of knowledge, have the confidence to make such a declaration. If the complete truth is uncovered, one will never have any reason to develop a thought that is contrary to the Arabic Glorious Qur’ân. Hence, the last part becomes self-explanatory.

The Law of Interpretation of the Arabic Glorious Qur’ân, as briefly explained above, outlines a system of using only decisive facts as a guideline for interpreting allegorical verses. Such a system clearly rules out any

room for nonsensical-untruths! The fact that such a system is laid out in the Arabic Glorious Qur'ân by itself bears witness to the divine nature of the Arabic Glorious Qur'ân!

*The meaning of the Arabic word âmanû in the context of the Arabic Qur'an:*

**The Arabic term *imân* or *âmanû* as used in many verses of the Arabic Glorious Qur'ân means: 'those who have carefully studied and analysed a subject and has found the truth about it. Then, as a result of the findings believes in its truth based on evidence, and acted upon it.'**

The Arabic term has many branches which are used in Islâm, and has many meanings, yet it never includes something that cannot be proved.

**By:**

**Sulaiman Ibrâhîm**

**Cape Town**