

A Journey from Darkness towards Light: the Quranic Perspective on the Concept of Light - Part II

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In the previous part, we saw that God characterizes Himself in the Qur'an as being the Light of the heavens and the earth (24:35). Also, everything created by God has light. Therefore, we have two types of light: the light which is created and the light which is the creator. The light which is the creator (i.e., God) is infinite and perfect, so no darkness can be imagined with it.¹ But when we come down from this hierarchy of light, the light gradually becomes weaker and weaker, and, in a sense, it can be said that darkness is becoming more and more. And when we reach the bottom of this hierarchy, the darkness is in its maximum and the light reaches its minimum. But nothing in the creation is absolutely dark. This can be understood from the Qur'an, and there are many references to this in our hadiths and supplications.

¹ Of course, as we explained before, darkness is not something real; it is just the lack of some degree of light.

Light of God as Portrayed in the Supplications

In *Du'a al-Jawshan al-Kabir*, there are one-hundred parts, each of which contains ten names of God.² In part 47, there are ten names of God, which are all related to God being the Light:

يَا نُورَ النُّورِ

O Light of lights!

The former is the creative light and the latter is the created light; so the passage means, God is the light that creates the rest of the lights.

يَا مُنَوِّرَ النُّورِ

O Illuminator of light!

Not only You are the most perfect light, but You are the one that gives light to the light. You are the one from whom comes whatever they have.

يَا خَالِقَ النُّورِ يَا مُدَبِّرَ النُّورِ

O Creator of light, O Planner of light!

You are the one who manages every other light. Everything is under God's management and control.

يَا مُقَدِّرَ النُّورِ

O Determiner of light!

² For an introduction to this supplication, see Shomali, M. A. "Reflections on Dua Jawshan Kabir" in *Spiritual Quest*, vol. 2, Issue 2, Number 4, Summer and Autumn 2012, pp. 69-83.

You are the one who decides the measure of light in everything and determines how much light every being has and how much light every action generates. If we have good actions or good thoughts or beliefs, God has defined how much light we receive through them.

يَا نُورَ كُلِّ نُورٍ

O Light of all lights!

Every light is in need of You—just as the moon, which, though very shining in the middle of lunar months, receives its light from the sun.

يَا نُورًا قَبْلَ كُلِّ نُورٍ يَا نُورًا بَعْدَ كُلِّ نُورٍ

O Light that comes before every light, O Light that comes after all lights!

Of course, this preceding is not necessarily in time, but in ontological order, because even when there was no time God existed. God is the light that exists before every light and will continue to exist after every light.

يَا نُورًا فَوقَ كُلِّ نُورٍ يَا نُورًا لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ نُورٌ

O Light that is above every light, O Light whom no light resembles!

God is the light that is above and superior to all lights, and He is the light that has no similar. So we have to keep in mind that whatever we say about God is not really a description of God's essence. Imam Baqir (a) is reported to have said,

كلما ميزتموه بأوهامكم في أدق معانيه مخلوق مصنوع مثلكم مردود إليكم

Whatever you distinguish by your perceptions in its most sophisticated senses is a created, manufactured being like you, which turns back to you (Majlisi 1403AH, 66:292-3).

No matter how much we try to be careful in our understanding of God, in the end, the image that we create in our mind of God is not God; rather, it is a creation like us. Imam Ali (a) says in *Nahj al-balaghah* that if you asked an ant to describe God, the ant would describe Him as a super ant—something like itself, but much bigger. This is the utmost an ant can think of. We human beings think of God in the same way. We think of something like us but much bigger, much more powerful, though God is not a superman or a super ant or some other super thing. God is completely transcendent, completely different and, according to the Qur'an, only the people who are purified (*mukhlasin*) can describe Him.³ Of course, their description is not perfect either, but it is acceptable. God is greater than being described and characterized by anyone:

الله أكبر من أن يوصف

The Light of Creation in the Qur'an

The Qur'an teaches us that God has created light and darkness (in the sense that was explained) in the universe:

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَجَعَلَ الظُّلُمَاتِ وَالنُّورَ ثُمَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِرَبِّهِمْ يَعْدِلُونَ

³ We read in Qur'an 37:159-60, "Clear is Allah of whatever they allege [about Him], [all] except Allah's purified servants."

All praise belongs to God who created the heavens
and the earth and made the darkneses and the light .
Yet the faithless equate [others] with their Lord.
(Qur'an, 6:1)

Right after mentioning the creation of the heavens and the earth, we are told about the creation of the light and darkness, which indicates that every creature has some degree of light and some darkness. These expressions are not metaphorical. Everything really has some light. On the Day of Judgment, we are told in the Qur'an, the earth, our planet, which is now in need of the sun's light, will itself glow with the divine light:

وَ أَشْرَقَتِ الْأَرْضُ بِنُورِ رَبِّهَا

And the earth will glow with the light of her Lord.
(Qur'an, 39: 69)

So even the earth will illuminate without depending on the light of the sun or electricity. The earth by itself will be shining. It can be understood from hadiths that this phenomena starts happening in the time of Imam Mahdi. Imam Sadiq is quoted as saying:

إذا قام قائمنا اشرفت الارض بنور ربها و استغنى العباد عن ضوء الشمس و ذهب
الظلمة

When our Qa'im rises up, the earth will be shining with the light of her Lord and people will not be in need of the light of the Sun and darkness will go away. (*Kashf ul-Ghummah*, vol. 2, p. 464)

The Light of Creation in Supplications

In *Du'a Kumayl*, we read,

و بنور وجهك الذي اضاء له كل شيء

By the light of Your Face, by which everything is illuminated. (Tusi 1411 AH, 2:844)

The light that comes from God has made everything bright. Also, in *Du'a 'Ahd*, we read,

أستلك باسمك الذي اشرقت به السموات و الارضون

I beseech Thee in Your Name which lights up the heavens and the earths. (Majlisi 1403AH, 83:284)

If the heavens and the earth have light, it is because of one of the names of God. Unfortunately, we are not able to see this light now, but, as we explained, On the Day of Judgment it will become manifest.

The Light of Human Beings

Let us now move on to the light which concerns us as human beings. Unlike other creatures which have a fixed innate degree of light, human beings and jinns have free will and can have different degrees of light as a result. We can speak of three states in human beings and jinns. The initial state is the state that we have when we are born (or before that, when human spirit is given to the embryo). The light that we have at that stage is the light of *fitrah*: a primordial God-given nature which is imbued with an understanding of the self and with the understanding and love of God. Then, the environment and context in which one is born—especially one's parents—influence him and lead him either to remain loyal to God or to go to other directions.

Every person is born with some ability to distinguish between what is good and right and what is bad and wrong. This is why people are responsible; this is why people are held accountable for what they do.

If we were not able to understand, how could God expect us to be accountable? When a prophet comes or, in our age, when we are faced with different truth-claims, how can we be responsible to go for the right one if we are not able to discern it? So we have some initial light. This is the first state, which in turn can be divided into different subcategories.

The second state is the state of adding acquired light to the initial God given light. Those at this state have two types of light: the light which was given to them at the beginning free of charge and the acquired light which is the profit they have made by using their God-given light. In this article, we will focus on how we can achieve this light.

The third state is for the people who have not been able to acquire the additional light and consequently may lose their initial light wholly or partly or at least have not increased it. So there are three general states.

In the past, we referred to *ayat al-kursi* in which all the three states are mentioned.

How to Achieve the Acquired Light?

We want to focus on how to reach the second state. This is our main point: how can we upgrade ourselves from the first state to the second?

The Role and Light of the Prophets and Scriptures

We will first discuss the role of Scriptures and the prophets and then concentrate on Prophet Muhammad (s) and the Qur'an and what the Qur'an teaches us about acquiring light.

Scriptures

We read in the Qur'an,

فَإِنْ كَذَّبُوكَ فَقَدْ كَذَّبَ رَسُولٌ مِّن قَبْلِكَ جَاءُوا بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ وَالزُّبُرِ وَالْكِتَابِ الْمُنِيرِ

But if they deny you, then before you [other] apostles have been denied, who came with manifest signs, holy writs ,and an illuminating scripture. (Qur'an, 3: 184)

In this verse, we are told that the *rusul* (apostles) came with “an illuminating scripture.” It is noteworthy that although *rusul* is plural, the Qur'an speaks of *al-kitab al-munir* (illuminating scripture) in singular. As we discussed in the previous part, this scripture is something that includes all the books that were given to some of the prophets.⁴ So *kitab* (scripture/book) is used in two senses. Although the Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur'an are scriptures, they are all manifestation of another scripture, which is a level of God's knowledge. This is why the Qur'an states,

إِنَّهُ لَقُرْآنٌ كَرِيمٌ فِي كِتَابٍ مَّكْنُونٍ

This is indeed a noble Qur'an, in a hidden Book.
(Qur'an, 56: 77-78)

So, we can say, all the prophets came with the “illuminating scripture,” a book which gives light. So the Torah, the Gospel, the Zabur (Psalms), and the Qur'an all have light. The same idea is expressed in the following verse:

وَإِنْ يُكَذِّبُوكَ فَقَدْ كَذَّبَ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ جَاءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُهُم بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ وَالزُّبُرِ وَالْكِتَابِ الْمُنِيرِ

⁴ It should be noted that it is not that every prophet brought the book. Out of 124000 prophets, only some of them brought books and others preached and taught the book given to a previous or perhaps contemporary messenger.

If they impugn you, those before them have impugned [likewise]: their apostles brought them manifest proofs, [holy] writs, and an illuminating scripture. (Qur'an, 35: 25)

In addition to the above verses that mention the divine “illuminating scripture,” other Qur’anic verses talk about particular scriptures as containing light. We will have a survey of these verses below.

The Torah

In surah 5, God speaks about the Torah that was revealed to Prophet Moses (a) as containing light:

إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَا التَّوْرَةَ فِيهَا هُدًى وَ نُورٌ

We sent down the Torah containing guidance and light. (Qur'an, 5: 44)

Elsewhere the Qur’an says:

وَمَا قَدَرُوا اللَّهَ حَقَّ قَدْرِهِ إِذْ قَالُوا مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْنَا بَشِيرًا مِّنْ شَيْءٍ قُلْ مَنْ أَنْزَلَ الْكِتَابَ الَّذِي جَاءَ بِهِ مُوسَى نُورًا وَ هُدًى لِّلنَّاسِ

They did not regard God with the regard due to Him when they said, ‘God has not sent down anything to any human.’ Say, ‘Who had sent down the Book that was brought by Moses as a light and guidance for the people. (Qur’an, 6:91)

Gospel

The Qur’an also refers to Gospel as containing light:

وَ قَمَّيْنَا عَلَىٰ آثَرِهِمْ يَٰعِيسَىٰ ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ مُصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ مِنَ التَّوْرَةِ وَ ءَاتَيْنَاهُ
الْإِنْجِيلَ فِيهِ هُدًى وَ نُورٌ

And We followed them with Jesus son of Mary, to confirm that which was before him of the Torah, and We gave him the Evangel containing guidance and light, (Qur'an, 5: 46)

This leaves no doubt that, from the Qur'anic point of view, all divine messages, all divine books, which were sent down to guide human beings, have light, and this light is the light of guidance. Although everything created by God has light, the light of scriptures is a special light; it is a light that can guide; it is a light that we can understand. We may not be able to understand that everything has light—otherwise, we would have faith in God without any difficulties—but we can understand by reason and heart that the books that God has sent us have light. The prophets also have light, and that is why when we listen to them or look at them, we find their love in our hearts. This is a special light.

The Qur'an

Although all divine books have light, in the case of the Qur'an this becomes more obvious. In Qur'an 7:157, God talks about the light of His final scripture:

فَالَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا بِهِ وَ ءَزَّوْهُ وَ نَصَرُوهُ وَ اتَّبَعُوا النُّورَ الَّذِى أُنزِلَ مَعَهُ أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ
الْمُفْلِحُونَ

Those who believe in him [i.e., the Prophet], honour him, and help him and follow the light that has been sent down with him, they are the felicitous. (Qur'an, 7: 157)

The phrase “the light that has been sent down with him” indicates that the Qur’an is not separate from the Prophet; it is a light that has come with the Prophet so and is united with him. We will elaborate more on this point later.

In another verse, we read,

فَدَّ جَاءَكُمْ مِّنَ اللَّهِ نُورٌ وَكِتَابٌ مُّبِينٌ

Certainly there has come to you a light from God,
and a manifest Book. (Qur’an, 5: 15)

What is meant by “light” in this verse is either the book itself or the Prophet (s).

Elsewhere the Qur’an says,

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ فَدَّ جَاءَكُمْ بُرْهَانٌ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكُمْ نُورًا مُّبِينًا

O mankind! Certainly a proof has come to you from
your Lord, and We have sent down to you a manifest
light. (Qur’an, 4:174)

A question might arise here: why does God say, “a *manifest* light”? Is it not a part of the nature and definition of the light that it is manifest? Some might think that the word “manifest” is just added for emphasis, but I think the addition of this word is because some lights, although manifest in themselves, are not manifest for us; for example, all the angels have light, but we cannot see their lights. God Himself is the light of lights, but we cannot see His light. Certainly, the problem lies in us, not in the light, which, according to its classic definition, is *manifest in itself and manifest of other things*. We are like a person who has put something on his eyes and cannot see the light of the sun.

The Qur'an is a "manifest light," because everyone—even if they are not very educated—can still understand many things from the Qur'an, as long as their hearts are not deformed. Many people have embraced Islam just because of the Qur'an. Although the translations of the Qur'an—and basically translations in general—are not perfect, still people can understand the Qur'an or actually see the light of the Qur'an.

There are reports by reliable people that they were able to see the light coming from the Qur'an. A very well-known case in Iran was Karbalai Kazim who lived in the time of Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi. Some of the people who met Karbalai Kazim are still alive, like Grand Ayatollah Makarim Shirazi. Karbalai Kazim used to live in a village outside Arak in central Iran. He was a simple and illiterate man, but at the same time very sincere and pious.

One time, in the month of Ramadan, a preacher went to their village and talked about the necessity of giving alms (zakat). So he took it seriously and asked his father and also the landlord for whom his father used to work to pay zakat. However, they did not accept, so he decided to leave his village and work at other places as a laborer. After some time, his people sent him a message that they were ready to give zakat and asked him to come back. He went back and started working with his father. In their village, there was one *imamzadeh* (the holy tomb of a descendant of an Imam). One time, after he visited the *imamzadeh* and was leaving, two people came and asked him to go with them for ziyarah. He told them that he had already been there, but they insisted and took him inside. There they asked him to read the Qur'anic verses that were written on the ceiling. He said, he was not able to read anything, but they insisted that he read, so he started reading, and then he passed out. After he became conscious, he was able to recite the whole Qur'an by heart, not only from the beginning to the end but also from the end to the beginning.

He was taken to Qom and was tested by different scholars. For instance, he was shown an Arabic text that contained the verses of the Qur'an besides other materials, all written in the same format, then he was asked to distinguish Qur'anic verses from the other materials. He was able to quickly show the Qur'anic verses. When they asked him how he could do that, He said, "I see light in these parts." He was not able to read, but he was just able to see the light of the verses of the Qur'an.

Although it is not possible for everyone to see this real light, the Qur'an has also a "manifest light" which can be understood by reason and heart, a light that can be perceived even by a non-Muslim. The Qur'an says,

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ رُوحًا مِّنْ أَمْرِنَا مَا كُنْتَ تَدْرِي مَا الْكِتَابُ وَلَا الْإِيمَانُ وَ
لَكِن جَعَلْنَاهُ نُورًا نَّهْدِي بِهِ مَنْ نَّشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا وَإِنَّكَ لَتَهْدِي إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ

Thus We have revealed to you the spirit of Our dispensation. You did not know what the Book is, nor what is faith; but We made it a light that We may guide by its means whomever We wish⁵ of Our servants. And indeed you guide to a straight path. (Qur'an, 42:52)

Thus, prophets have brought us divine books that are light. However, there is something special about Prophet Muhammad (s). God says in the Qur'an that the Prophet (s) himself was also light. I do not want to say that the other prophets were not light, but this is not mentioned

⁵ The passage "We may guide ... whomever We wish" and similar passages in the Qur'an do not indicate arbitrary decisions on the part of God. In other verses of the Qur'an, God clearly tells us about the criteria of His choice or who are more qualified to receive this guidance. See, for instance, Qur'an 2:26, 258; 13:27; 39:3.

in the Qur'an, so there must be a reason for it. When it comes to scriptures, the Qur'an states that all of them are light and give light, and particularly mentions the Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur'an, but when it comes to prophets, God only talks about Prophet Muhammad (s) as being a source of light:

يَأْتِيهَا النَّجَىٰ إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ شَاهِدًا وَ مُبَشِّرًا وَ نَذِيرًا وَ دَاعِيًا إِلَى اللَّهِ بِإِذْنِهِ وَ سِرَاحًا
مُتَبَرِّقًا

O Prophet! Indeed We have sent you as a witness, as a bearer of good news and as a warner and as a summoner to God by His permission and as a radiant lamp. (Qur'an, 33: 45-46)

The Prophet (s) is a witness, since he shows what God wants a human being to be like, and also because he bears witness as to the way people treated his message. The Prophet (s) also gives good tidings and warnings. He also calls people to God with His leave. Of course, as we saw in the previous part, this is the guidance in the form of actually taking the guided to the destination (*al-is'āl ilā al-matlūb*) and not simply showing the path (*ir'ā'at al-tariq*).

But the Prophet (s) is also “a radiant lamp.” Not only is he described as a lamp, but he is said to be a “radiant lamp.” This shows that he is a lamp that is always on illuminating. It is interesting to note that the Qur'an is a “manifest light” (Qur'an, 4:174), and, according to the above verse, the Prophet (s) is also an illuminating lamp. This shows a kind of unity between the Prophet (s) and the scripture he was given. The Qur'an says,

الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الرَّسُولَ النَّبِيَّ الْأُمِّيَّ الَّذِي يَجِدُونَهُ مَكْتُوبًا عِنْدَهُمْ فِي التَّوْرَةِ وَ الْإِنْجِيلِ
يَأْمُرُهُمْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَ يَنْهَاهُمْ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَ يُحِلُّ لَهُمُ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَ يُحَرِّمُ عَلَيْهِمُ

الْحَبَائِثَ وَ يَضَعُ عَنْهُمْ إِصْرَهُمْ وَ الْأَغْلَالَ الَّتِي كَانَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ فَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا بِهِ وَ
عَزَّوهُ وَ نَصَرُوهُ وَ اتَّبَعُوا النُّورَ الَّذِي أُنزِلَ مَعَهُ أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

Those who follow the Apostle, the uninstructed prophet, whose mention they find written with them in the Torah and the Evangel, who bids them to do what is right and forbids them from what is wrong, makes lawful to them all the good things and forbids them from all vicious things, and relieves them of their burdens and the shackles that were upon them—those who believe in him, honour him, and help him and follow the light that has been sent down with him, they are the felicitous. (7:157)

This verse talks about following the light which has been sent down with the Prophet and not just to him. So the Prophet (s) is not like a person who has no light of himself and just carries a lamp; rather, he himself is a lamp and also carries a lamp which is the Qur'an. We will continue this discussion about how to acquire more light in the next part.