

Dignity in Islam - Part I⁹

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Abstract

This paper focuses on analyzing the concept of *'aziz* (honorable, dignified). The author tries first to clarify its meaning as it is defined by major Arabic lexicons, and second to explain it when it is used to refer to God, especially in Qur'anic verses. The term "*'aziz*," when used for God in the Qur'an, is sometimes accompanied by words denoting other divine attributes. This kind of accompaniment is regarded to indicate that divine intrinsic strength holds in combination with knowledge, wisdom, mercy, and generosity and God uses His internal power with respect to His attributes as different occasions demand. God is the source of honor, and from Him everyone should derive his honor.

Keywords: *honor, dignity, intrinsic strength, combination of divine attributes.*

⁹ This paper is based on parts one and two of a series of 12 lectures delivered by the author in London in Ramadan 2015.

Dignity is a very important concept in Islam. It can indicate an attribute of God or a quality of creatures such as human beings. In this part, the Qur'anic perspective on dignity as an attribute of God will be studied.

A Synopsis of this Series

God is the source and origin of dignity. The absolute dignity belongs to God, and any other sort of dignity originates from Him. In His act of creation, He has given all of us dignity. The fact that we are created by God dignifies us, and this is true for all creatures of God. For example, when a famous painter paints a picture, the fact that the painting is produced by that artist gives significance to it. Of course, among the many paintings of that renowned painter, some will be considered as more important and outstanding. But even his least regarded paintings will be given attention and respect, because they were produced by that famous artist. Hence, everything that is created by God has dignity, even an insect or a plant. But among the creatures of God, some have more dignity such as human beings.

In this series, we will see how God, in His creation, has given us a great share of dignity. He has given us some capital, which is our dignity by birth: "Certainly We have honored the Children of Adam" (Qur'an 17:70). We have to add to this dignity. Otherwise, we will lose it, and it will be a serious loss.

Then we will see how God, in His legislation and guidance, has provided us with instructions regarding how to appreciate and safeguard our dignity and how to increase it.

Next, we will see how God wants us to extend this dignity to others, through dignified interaction with other people. A dignified person

also treats others with dignity, and never humiliates them. If you see someone that humiliates other people, then you can conclude that he himself lacks dignity. People of dignity never use abusive words for other people. A believer will never lower himself into dishonor.

The series will end with a discussion on how Imam Mahdi (a) will offer humanity as a whole a way of life that would guarantee dignity and honor for everyone, and not only for some select people.

God as the Source of Dignity and Honor

God has dignity and indeed the dignity of God is the source for all kinds of dignity. He is the absolute source of dignity in the same way that He is the source of light: “And one whom God has not granted any light has no light” (Qur’an 24:40).

In the Qur’an, we have different terms and notions that refer to the dignity of God, and perhaps the most obvious term is *‘izzah* (honor, dignity, might). *‘Izzah* is used many times in the Qur’an. If we look up all the different occurrences of this term, including the various derivatives from its root, it appears 119 times in the Qur’an, and most of these relate to God.

The term *‘aziz* occurs ninety nine times in the Qur’an, most of which are used for God, and it is very rarely applied to other people (e.g., to the *‘Aziz* of Egypt who purchased Prophet Yusuf, or in a somewhat humorous sense to those who will be thrown into hell). Therefore, while there are a few exceptions, most of them refer to God.

Verses of the Qur’an

I would like to start with some verses that talk about *al-‘izzah* and the different divine attributes related to it.

مَنْ كَانَ يُرِيدُ الْعِزَّةَ فَلِلَّهِ الْعِزَّةُ جَمِيعًا إِلَيْهِ يَصْعَدُ الْكَلِمُ الطَّيِّبُ وَالْعَمَلُ الصَّالِحُ يَرْفَعُهُ

Whoever seeks honor [should know that] honor entirely belongs to God. To Him ascends the good word, and the righteous deeds elevate it. (Qur'an 35:10)

When this verse mentions that dignity entirely belongs to God, this does not mean that no one else can possess *'izzah*; rather, it means that all *'izzah* belongs to God as the source and then He gives to others. It is a gift from Him. Creatures do not own it by themselves; they receive it from God.

The verse mentions:

إِلَيْهِ يَصْعَدُ الْكَلِمُ الطَّيِّبُ وَالْعَمَلُ الصَّالِحُ يَرْفَعُهُ

To Him ascends the good word, and the righteous deeds elevate it

God says that if you want dignity, you must be aware that it belongs to God. And the means of reaching that source is by rising up. You cannot stay where you are and aspire to be connected to God and have *'izzah*. You must move, rise, and ascend. This is done by having *al-kalim al-tayyib*, which refers to proper beliefs (*'aqidah*) and a proper understanding of your position—that is, where you have come from, what your creator expects of you, what your future holds, and so forth.

After this, the verse mentions a very subtle point. When it comes to beliefs, God says that our beliefs ascend. But with regard to righteous deeds, He says that they help elevate the beliefs higher. Right beliefs move upward and righteous deeds serve as a lift that takes them even higher. This is because we are our beliefs; our thoughts and attitudes

are what make us. Every person is formed by his understanding and thoughts. Our beliefs are more important than our actions, because it is our beliefs that shape the way we understand everything. What is in our mind and heart is the main thing, and then actions help us to move. For example, when a person who lives in a very tall building wants to go to the top floor, he will use the lift and go up. What is rising is that person, and the role of the lift is just helping him rise. Beliefs are the main things that rise, and righteous deeds help the beliefs rise further. We must therefore invest a lot in our beliefs, and then our faith will produce righteous conduct.

Dissociating from the Dishonorable

الَّذِينَ يَتَّخِذُونَ الْكَافِرِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَبِئْتَعُونَ عِنْدَهُمُ الْعِزَّةَ فَإِنَّ الْعِزَّةَ لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًا

Those who take the faithless for allies instead of the faithful. Do they seek honor with them? [If so,] indeed all honor belongs to God. (Qur'an 4:139)

In this verse, God refers to people who associate themselves with those who are against the truth and faith. In the Qur'an, the term *kafir* (faithless, disbeliever) in most cases refers to a person who deliberately denies and rejects the truth. Allamah Tabatabai, in *al-Mizan*, says there are four types of *kufr* (disbelief), and most occurrences of *kufr* in the Qur'an refer to *kufr al-juhud* (deliberate rejection of the truth), such as the rejection of truth by people such as Abu Sufyan, Abu Jahl, and Abu Lahab. Therefore, *kafir* does not simply mean non-Muslim.

God says that some people try to associate themselves with those who deny the truth. This does not mean simple friendship; rather, the root *w-l-y*, mentioned in the verse, means to associate with them, and to join

their camp. Sometimes, when you see you are a minority, you try to join gangs and groups spontaneously, because you feel alone. But this is a big mistake.

The *kuffar* (disbelievers) may have many things, such as power and wealth, but they do not have dignity. Do not think that you will get dignity by joining them. Truly, dignity totally belongs to God, and He is its ultimate source. Of course, He will give this to others as a gift, but no one other than Him owns it by himself.

Remain Steadfast with Honor

وَلَا يَخْزِنَكَ فَتُونُهُمْ إِنَّ الْعِزَّةَ لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًا هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ

Do not grieve at their remarks; indeed all might belongs to God; He is the All-hearing, the All-knowing. (Qur'an 10:65)

Sometimes people break our heart, especially if we have a great mission that they do not appreciate. Sometimes people show interest with all their energy and passion, and sometimes they treat us with mockery and ridicule us. God tells us not to allow them to affect us by what they say. They cannot reduce or increase our honor. We must do our work; if they do not appreciate it, or even if they abuse us, we must not worry, for all honor is with God.

The way the prophets were treated was shocking. They were ridiculed and labeled as insane and confused. They were tortured, killed, and exiled. But God maintained their honor, because they sought it from its source. And today it is they who have remained honorable, not the like of Pharaoh or Nimrod. Honor is devoted to those who do good deeds, even if people do not appreciate or understand them. In the long

term, it is only truth that will prevail; it is only good intentions, actions, and beliefs that will determine who has dignity.

Hypocrites

يَقُولُونَ لَئِن رَّجَعْنَا إِلَى الْمَدِينَةِ لَيُخْرِجَنَّ الْأَعَزُّ مِنْهَا الْأَذَلَّ وَلِلَّهِ الْعِزَّةُ وَلِرَسُولِهِ
وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَلَكِنَّ الْمُنَافِقِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

They say, “When we return to the city, the mighty will surely expel the abased from it.” Yet all might belongs to God and His Apostle, and the faithful, but the hypocrites do not know. (Qur’an 63:8)

This verse refers to the hypocrites under the leadership of ‘Abdullah ibn Ubayy. They would say to one another that there is no reason to obey the Prophet (s). They regarded themselves as very honorable, and their plan was to expel from the city of Medina those they deemed to lack dignity. They thought that Prophet Muhammad (s) and his followers were not honorable.

This verse makes it clear that actually quite the opposite is true. Honor and dignity belong to God, then to the Prophet (s), and then to the believers. God is the source of dignity, and whoever is closer to the source has a greater share. Hence, Prophet Muhammad (s), being the closest to God, has a very high level of honor, and then the believers. Non-believers also have honor, but the closer a person is to the source, the more dignity he will have.

However, people like ‘Abdullah ibn Ubay did not understand this. Not only did they lack honor, but they also suffered from ignorance (*jahl*). They wrongfully thought that they possessed honor and that the Prophet (s) lacked it.

According to the previous few verses, it seems very clear that God has the attribute of *'izzah*, which can be translated as dignity, honor, or might. He then grants this to people, especially to those who are close to Him; namely, prophets, Imams, pious people, and so forth.

Meaning of 'Aziz

Let us delve into the meaning of *'izzah* (honor) and also the characteristics of God considering His *'izzah*. We will also discuss how God has granted dignity to everything He has created, especially human beings, and how we can add to this dignity and take care not to lose it. Furthermore, we will look at how we can interact with each other based on dignity and honor.

Regarding the accurate meaning of *'izzah* from its root, when we consult the major Arabic lexicons, we find a variety of meanings. *Lisan al-'Arab* quotes from al-Zajjaj: “*'Aziz* is the one who refuses to be overcome” (Ibn Manzur 1414 AH, 5:374). According to this, *'aziz* is strong and admits no external pressure or influence. In *Mufradat* by Raghīb al-Isfahani, it is said that when *'izzah* is used for a person then it refers to a condition, “a condition that prevents a person from being defeated” (Raghīb al-Isfahani 1412 AH, 536).

Therefore, *'izzah* is a kind of internal strength. According to Raghīb, when Arabs describe a soil as *'azaz*, they mean a soil that is very solid and strong, into which nothing can penetrate. Then Raghīb concludes that *'al-'aziz* can defeat but can never be defeated” (Raghīb al-Isfahani 1412 AH, 536).

Turayhi, in *Majma' al-bahrayn*, says that *'aziz* is one of the names of God, which denotes the fact that He dominates and overcomes other

things, but nothing can overcome or defeat Him (Turayhi 1375 Sh, 4:26).

When we reflect on these meanings, we find that there is something common in all of them: *'aziz* is one that has internal, essential, and intrinsic strength, and this strength is not from any external source. At times, when a particular thing is weak, it requires something else to give it strength. For example, when a sapling is planted, it is often propped up and supported by sticks so that it can be held upright and can grow. This is a kind of strength given to the sapling from an external source. But when a tree is well-rooted and grown, even the strongest winds are hardly able to move it. That tree is therefore *'aziz* and strong. The sampling, however, is not *'aziz*, as it required something external to give it strength.

God is *'AZIZ*

God is *'aziz*, because He is self-subsistent. He has all the power, all the strength, all the might, and all the greatness. Everything else has strength only as much as they receive from God. He is the source. Hence, everything receives some kind of *'izzah* from God, and those who are closer to Him receive more:

يَقُولُونَ لَئِن رَّجَعْنَا إِلَى الْمَدِينَةِ لَيُخْرِجَنَّ الْأَعَزُّ مِنْهَا الْأَذَلَّ وَلِلَّهِ الْعِزَّةُ وَلِرَسُولِهِ
وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَلَكِنَّ الْمُنَافِقِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

They say, "When we return to the city, the mighty will surely expel the abased from it." Yet all might belongs to Allah and His Apostle, and the faithful, but the hypocrites do not know. (Qur'an 63:8)

This kind of strength is seen when a person perseveres and does not succumb to defeat. The Holy Prophet (s) started his mission while he was almost totally alone. Imam Ali (a) believed in him, and then Lady Khadijah, and then some other supporters. He was alone, and then he was joined by a few people.

The supporters of the Holy Prophet were very few in number for thirteen years and were faced with severe persecution by the Quraysh and their allies. However, the Holy Prophet (s) did not compromise or withdraw. His opponents tried different things, including the lure of money, power, material riches, and then threats, but the Holy Prophet (s) remained strong. They failed to change his attitude and received this firm response: "If they were to put the Sun in my right hand and the Moon in my left to abandon my mission, I would not accept" (Ibn Hisham n.d., 1:266).

Where does such inner strength come from? Such strength cannot be imitated. It must be cultivated and nurtured by internal power and strength; otherwise, such external pressures can break a person to pieces. You must be connected with God in such a way that even if the whole world comes together, you do not compromise or withdraw. You should become like a mountain, which even storms cannot move.

Might, power, and strength belong to God, and He grants them to those close to Him.

Al-'Aziz and Other Divine Attributes

Many verses that mention God as *'aziz* end with a reference to one or more of His attributes. This is a very important Qur'anic point: as some kind of reference and support for what He says in the beginning and middle of a verse, God sometimes mentions some of His attributes.

When the name *al-'Aziz* is mentioned with another name, *al-'aziz* is always mentioned first. The only exception to this, that I have found, is when the name *al-Qawi* is used.

(A) AL-'AZIZ **and** AL-HAKIM

In twenty-nine cases, the Qur'an mentions *al-'Aziz* and then *al-Hakim* (the All-wise).

رَبَّنَا وَابْعَثْ فِيهِمْ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِكَ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ
إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

Our Lord, raise amongst them an apostle from among them, who should recite to them Your signs, and teach them the Book and wisdom, and purify them. Indeed You are the All-mighty, the All-wise. (2:129)

This is a prayer that Prophet Ibrahim and Prophet Isma'il made when they were building the Ka'bah. At the end of the verse, as a kind of reference to, and support for what they said and to show why they believed they can make this prayer, they said:

إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

Indeed You are the All-mighty, the All-wise. (2:129)

These names of God are very important. They are like a key or a password that can be used to open a gate and access many things. The mention of these names shows that we know what we are asking, Whom we are asking, and why we are asking. Truly, He is All-mighty and All-wise and that is why we are asking Him to grant our request.

In another verse, God says:

وَمَا جَعَلَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا بُشْرَىٰ لَكُمْ وَلِتَطْمَئِنَّ قُلُوبُكُم بِهِ وَمَا النَّصْرُ إِلَّا مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ
الْحَكِيمِ

Allah did not appoint it but as good news for you, and to reassure with it your hearts, and victory comes only from Allah, the All-mighty, the All-wise. (Qur'an 3:126)

No one can force Him to withdraw from His plan. He is *al-Hakim*, he has plans and purposes, and does not do things in vain.

Another example of when God mentions *al-'Aziz* and then *al-Hakim* is the following:

تَنْزِيلُ الْكِتَابِ مِنَ اللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَكِيمِ

The [gradual] sending down of the Book is from Allah, the All-mighty, the All-wise. (Qur'an 39:1)

(B) AL-'AZIZ and AL-RAHIM

Another combination of the names of God is the mention of *al-'Aziz* and *al-Rahim* (the All-merciful) together, of which there are thirteen instances in the Qur'an. The mention of *al-Rahim*, as with other names, is to suit the context of the verse. For example:

يَوْمَ لَا يُغْنِي مَوْلَىٰ عَنْ مَوْلَىٰ شَيْئًا وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ * إِلَّا مَنْ رَحِمَ اللَّهُ إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ
الرَّحِيمُ

The day when a friend will not avail a friend in any way, nor will they be helped, except for him on whom Allah has mercy. Indeed He is the All-mighty, the All-merciful. (Qur'an 44:41-42)

Because this verse speaks about people being unable to do anything without the mercy of God, the names of God that are mentioned at the end reflect this context, and hence both *al-'Aziz* and *al-Rahim* are mentioned.

(c) Other Combinations

Other examples where *al-'Aziz* is mentioned alongside other attributes are as follows:

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ يَفْضِي بَيْنَهُمْ بِحُكْمِهِ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْعَلِيمُ

Indeed, your Lord will decide between them by His judgement, and He is the All-mighty, the All-knowing. (Qur'an 27:78)

Here, God describes His role as a judge. A judge requires both power and knowledge, hence the name *al-'Alim* (the All-Knowing) is mentioned.

تَدْعُونِي لِأَكْفُرَ بِاللَّهِ وَأُشْرِكَ بِهِ مَا لَيْسَ لِي بِهِ عِلْمٌ وَأَنَا أَدْعُوكُمْ إِلَى الْعَزِيزِ الْغَفَّارِ

'You invite me to defy Allah and to ascribe to Him partners of which I have no knowledge, while I call you to the All-mighty, the All-forgiver.' (Qur'an 40:42)

كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا كُلِّهَا فَأَخَذْنَاهُمْ أَحَدًا عَزِيزٍ مُّقْتَدِرٍ

'Who denied all of Our signs. So We seized them with the seizing of One [who is] all-mighty, Omnipotent.' (Qur'an 54:42)

أَمْ عِنْدَهُمْ خَزَائِنُ رَحْمَةِ رَبِّكَ الْعَزِيزِ الْوَهَّابِ

‘Do they possess the treasures of the mercy of your Lord, the All-mighty, the All-munificent?’ (Qur’an 38:9)

As mentioned earlier, the only name mentioned before *al-‘Aziz* is *al-Qawi*:

فَلَمَّا جَاءَ أَمْرُنَا نَجَّيْنَا صَالِحًا وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مَعَهُ بِرَحْمَةٍ مِنَّا وَمِن خِزْيِ يَوْمِئِذٍ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ
هُوَ الْقَوِيُّ الْعَزِيزُ

So when Our edict came, We delivered Salih and the faithful who were with him by a mercy from Us, and from the [punishment and] disgrace of that day. Your Lord is indeed the All-strong, the All-mighty. (Qur’an 11:66)

اللَّهُ لَطِيفٌ بِعِبَادِهِ يُرَزِّقُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَهُوَ الْقَوِيُّ الْعَزِيزُ

Allah is all-attentive to His servants. He provides for whomever He wishes, and He is the All-strong, the All-mighty. (Qur’an 42:19)

Therefore, in tens of verses, the stress is upon God as *al-‘Aziz*, but then in some cases, He adds another attribute to show that His strength is often accompanied by another attribute, depending upon the situation and context. If there is a requirement of knowledge, then *al-‘Aziz* is accompanied by *al-‘Alim*; if wisdom is required, then *al-Hakim* is mentioned; if there is a requirement of generosity, then there is a mention of *al-Wahhab*; or if revenge suits the context, then the name *Dhu intiqam* is mentioned. All of this is dependent upon what best suits the context of the verse.

From this, we can infer that His strength is not just brute force, but it is a wise, intelligent, generous power, and not a power that causes trouble and mischief. Of course, power in itself is positive, but there are times when—if not guided and controlled properly—it can be destructive. A volcano has power, a nuclear bomb has power, and tyrants also have power; this is not necessarily good or praiseworthy, but God is always *al-ghani al-hamid* (self-sufficient and praiseworthy).

Conclusion

Al'Aziz is the one who can defeat but cannot be defeated. God is self-subsistent and the All-mighty. He is the source of power and honor. Everyone who seeks honor should ask God to grant it to him. Since, in addition to honor and all might, God has other virtuous attributes, His acts are carried out all-things-considered in that they are not done out of mere power without considering the relevant aspects of involved actions. God's power is real power, and therefore it comes with mercy, wisdom, generosity, and knowledge.

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