



Center for Cultural
and Ethical Studies

Spiritual Quest

A Biannual Journal of
Ethics and Spirituality

Vol. 9 | No. 1 | Winter & Spring 2019

Wisdom – Part III

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Abstract



This continuation of the series on wisdom in the Quran and hadith further examines the use of *hikma* (wisdom) in the Quran. With regard to giving wisdom, three verbs are used in the Quran: “taught” wisdom, “gave” wisdom, and “sent down” wisdom. Wisdom, according to the commentators of the Quran, consists of three major elements: it is a type of knowledge that is beneficial and prevents from mischief and evil deeds. According to them and also in the view of etymologists, knowledge is not enough for *hikma*; it must be accompanied by understanding. A wise person is an intellectual who is thoughtful, not just a person who has memorized something.

Keywords

Islamic ethics, wisdom, Quranic exegesis, divine gift.

Hikma in the Quran

In verse 113 of surah 4, God says:

﴿وَلَوْ لَا فَضْلُ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكَ وَرَحْمَتُهُ لَهَمَّتْ طَائِفَةٌ مِنْهُمْ أَنْ يُضِلُّوكَ وَمَا يُضِلُّونَ إِلَّا أَنْفُسَهُمْ وَمَا يَضُرُّونَكَ مِنْ شَيْءٍ وَأَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَعَلَّمَكَ مَا لَمْ تَكُنْ تَعْلَمُ وَكَانَ فَضْلُ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكَ عَظِيمًا﴾

Were it not for God's grace and His mercy on you, a group of them were bent on leading you astray; but they do not mislead anyone except themselves, and they cannot do you any harm. God has sent down to you the Book and wisdom, and He has taught you what you did not know, and great is God's grace upon you.

In this verse, God says that if He had not had grace and mercy on the Prophet (s), a group of people would have decided to misguide him. This either means that because of God's mercy and favor, they did not manage to misguide the Prophet (s), or, more likely, it means that because of God's grace and mercy, they even did not try to misguide the Prophet (s), because they did not have any hope that if they tried, they could misguide the Prophet (s). Surely, the Prophet (s) was not misguided, but God emphasizes that this was because of His grace and mercy.

﴿وَمَا يَضُرُّونَكَ مِنْ شَيْءٍ﴾

[A]nd they cannot do you any harm. (4:113)

If God wants to protect someone, no one can harm him, and He has declared that

﴿اللَّهُ وَلِيُّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا﴾

Allah is the guardian of the faithful. (2:257)

He does not impose Himself on anyone, but if a person chooses Him as His guardian, protector, and support, no one can harm him. People can create problems; they can imprison, torture, and kill someone, which is the maximum they can do, but if God wants, He can protect a person against all these problems. However, if for some reasons God wants someone to suffer in this world so that he will be rewarded in the hereafter, such a person is not in loss; those who were killed, for instance, in Uhud, Badr, and Karbala did not lose anything. The only time one loses is when he gives in. If a Muslim says that he does not want to be a Muslim or a faithful person anymore and wishes to be like unbelievers, he loses, but if he wants to remain on the right path and have God as his guardian, no one can harm him, even if they kill him. By killing him, they actually give him a higher position. They cannot take away the beauty of his faith. The Quran says,

﴿ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا عَلَيْكُمْ أَنْفُسَكُمْ لَا يَضُرُّكُمْ مَنْ ضَلَّ إِذَا اهْتَدَيْتُمْ ﴾

O you who have faith! Take care of your own souls.
He who strays cannot hurt you if you are guided.
(5:105)

﴿ وَأَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ ﴾

God has sent down to you the Book and wisdom.
(4:113)

Now, with regard to giving wisdom, three verbs are used in the Quran: sometimes God says that He has “taught” wisdom, sometimes He says that He “gave” wisdom, and sometimes, as in the above verse, He states that He “sent down” wisdom.

So, one may be taught or granted wisdom, or wisdom may be sent down to him. One cannot go and buy wisdom, nor can he borrow

or fabricate it. Wisdom is a gift, which must come from God either directly or through prophets and other godly individuals. Later, we will discuss about wisdom as a quality of a person, a sentence, or advice. In the present case, even a hypocrite or a polytheist may have a wise saying. However, as a quality, it only comes from God.

Below, you see another verse about wisdom, in which wisdom and the book are very clearly connected in the case of Prophet Muhammad (s):

﴿يُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ﴾

[T]each them the Book and wisdom. (2:129; 3:164; 62:2)

Regarding Jesus (a), we have the following verse:

﴿عَلَّمْتُكَ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ﴾

I taught you the Book and wisdom (5:110)

So, the book and wisdom are connected.

There are a few more verses about wisdom in the Quran; one is verse 125 of surah al-Nahl. It is a very well-known verse about the way we should invite people toward God and Islam. God says,

﴿ادْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحِكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ وَجَادِلْهُمْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ ضَلَّ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِالْمُهْتَدِينَ﴾

Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good advice and dispute with them in a manner that is best. Indeed, your Lord knows best those who stray from His way, and He knows best those who are guided. (16:125)

This is one of the very beautiful and insightful verses of the Quran. Sometime people do not know how to invite other people to Islam, or how to convince someone of their good ideas, so they try to impose it and force people to accept it, but here God tells us to call people toward His path with wisdom and good advice.

Another point in this verse is that God does not say, "Call and take them towards the truth." We are not supposed to take people to their final destination; rather, we should just guide them to the right path, and then they have to travel on this path, so that it could be their own achievement.

A third point about this verse is that in order to invite people to the way of God, it is not enough to be knowledgeable. There are people who are knowledgeable, but they are not wise and do not know how to help and guide people. For example, a doctor may see a patient and notice problems in his nutrition and thus advise him to eat certain foods, without realizing that this patient is a poor person and cannot afford to buy the foods he suggests. A wise doctor is the one who knows what a patient can afford and gives him a prescription accordingly. So, wisdom is very important.

﴿وَالْمَوْعِظَةُ الْحَسَنَةُ﴾

... and good advice (16:125)

﴿وَجَادِلْهُمْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ﴾

... and dispute with them in a manner that is best.
(16:125)

If you need to discuss, do that in the best way, not with anger, shouting, or insulting, which lead nowhere. You cannot find even one person in the world that disagrees with you and then accepts your view when you insult him. If you speak nicely and gently, there

is a chance he may accept your view; but if you insult him, he will certainly not accept. Of course, if you use force, you may be able to silence a person for some time, but you can never convince him.

Another verse is verse sixty-three of surah al-Zukhruf, which is again about Jesus (a):

﴿وَلَمَّا جَاءَ عِيسَىٰ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ قَالَ قَدْ جِئْتُكُمْ بِالْحِكْمَةِ﴾

When Jesus brought those manifest proofs, he said, “I have certainly brought you wisdom.” (43:63)

“Wisdom” in this verse may refer to the Gospel itself, or, more likely, it may refer to the wise teachings of Jesus (a) in general. So, Jesus (a) brought wisdom.

In another verse, God says,

﴿وَاذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ وَمَا أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكُمْ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَالْحِكْمَةِ لِيُعْظَمَ بِهِ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَاعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ﴾

[A]nd remember Allah’s blessing upon you, and what He has sent down to you of the Book and wisdom to advise you therewith. Be wary of Allah and know that Allah has knowledge of all things. (2:231)

In surah al-Isrā’, we read,

﴿ذَلِكَ مِمَّا أَوْحَىٰ إِلَيْكَ رَبُّكَ مِنَ الْحِكْمَةِ﴾

These are among [precepts] that your Lord has revealed to you of wisdom. (17:39)

“Wisdom” in these verses seems to refer to the Quran, the revelation of God.

The next verse is from sura al-Aḥzāb, where God says:

﴿وَأَذْكُرَنَّ مَا يُثَلَّى فِي بُيُوتِكُمْ مِنْ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَالْحِكْمَةِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ لَطِيفًا خَبِيرًا﴾

And remember what is recited in your homes of the signs of Allah and wisdom. Indeed, Allah is all-attentive, all-aware. (33:34)

God says this to the wives of the Prophet (s), and it means that they had to remember the Quran, which was recited by the Prophet (s) in their homes. So, here also “wisdom” refers to the Quran.

Finally, the last verse to mention here is verse five of surah al-Qamar:

﴿حِكْمَةٌ بَالِغَةٌ فَمَا تُغْنِ التُّذْرُ﴾

... [and representing] far-reaching wisdom; but warnings are of no avail! (54:5)

“*Hikma baligha*” (far-reaching wisdom) means complete wisdom. This may refer to the signs of God that are complete in showing wisdom.

So, by merely reflecting on the verses of the Quran, we have understood that “wise” is an attribute applicable in the first place to God, who is the Wise, and then to His word, the Quran. It can also be applied to other things, though not in a perfect manner. We also realized that wisdom is such a great gift of God and, according to Quran 2:269, “an abundant good.” It is not comparable to most of the things we have; perhaps the best thing is faith or *taqwa* (piety), but wisdom is one of those very special gifts. It is much more important than money, position, reputation, and beauty; it is even more important than

knowledge. We realize that wisdom and the Quran are very much interconnected and the best way to acquire wisdom is to familiarize ourselves with the Quran. We also realize that wisdom is one of the things that a qualified leader must have; this is why when God wanted to give kingdom to David, He gave him wisdom. God also bestowed wisdom on Jesus (a) and Prophet Muhammad (s).

Now, let us survey the views of the commentators of the Quran to see how they have analyzed this concept. As far as I know, one does not find a very detailed discussion on wisdom in the commentaries of the Quran. There are many discussions about wisdom here and there, but I have not found any comprehensive discussions on wisdom from a Quranic perspective. Philosophers, however, have lots of discussions about theoretical and practical wisdom, but wisdom in philosophy is different from wisdom in the Quran and hadiths.

Hikma in the Views of Quranic Commentators

In some parts of *al-Mizan*, the great Allamah Tabataba'i writes about wisdom, such as in his commentary on Quran 6:125, where he mentions that although wisdom is defined as "reaching the truth by knowledge and intellect" (Tabataba'i, 1417 AH, 12:371), it is in reality the arguments and proofs that lead to the clear truth in which there is no doubt or ambiguity. So, when God says, "Call towards the path of your Lord with wisdom," according to Allamah Tabataba'i, it means, use a kind of argument and proof that leads to unambiguous truth. The strongest way someone can make an argument is called *burhan* (demonstration in logic). If you can demonstrate something in a way that leaves no doubts, this is wisdom according to Allamah Tabataba'i.

Commenting on the same verse, Ayatollah Makarim Shirazi says that wisdom here means knowledge, logic, and reasoning,

because “*hikma*” (wisdom) in Arabic is derived from the root *h-k-m*, which means “to stop.” If you have knowledge and use logic and argument, you stop the way of mischief and corruption.

Furthermore, in his commentary on Quran (2:269), Allamah Tabataba’i states that wisdom is a proposition or statement that corresponds to the reality and has a role in human happiness and salvation, even if it is related to the natural world. Therefore, mere knowledge is not wisdom; rather, it must have something to do with our happiness and salvation. Along the same lines, in his commentary on the verse “He will teach him the Book and wisdom, the Torah and the Evangel” (3:48), Allamah mentions that wisdom in this verse is the knowledge that is beneficial and that purely theoretical knowledge is not wisdom.

Ayatollah Makarim Shirazi, in his commentary on Quran 2:269, writes that there are different views on *hikma* (wisdom): it is interpreted as knowing the secrets of the world, knowing the truth of the Quran, knowing God, reaching the truth in words and action, and the divine light by which one can distinguish between satanic and divine inspirations. However, Ayatollah Makarim maintains, wisdom seems to have a broad meaning and include even prophethood; it is a type of knowledge which stops people from doing bad things and thus has practical significance. (Makarim Shirazi, 1374 sh, 2: 340-341)

Major Elements of Wisdom

As we saw, wisdom, according to the commentators of the Quran, consists of three major elements: it is a type of knowledge that is beneficial and prevents from mischief and evil deeds. These are the three elements put forward by the interpreters of the Quran when they try to define wisdom; they are not able to mention one word as an equivalent for wisdom, so they use different words and

concepts to explain the concept of wisdom.

Hikma in the View of Etymologists

Now, let us explore the meaning of *hikma* (wisdom) in etymological sources. In *Kitab al-ʿAyn*, it is said that “*hikma* refers to justice, knowledge, and forbearance. (Khalil ibn Ahmad, 1409 AH, 3:66). The author cannot find a single-word definition for *hikma*, so he uses the words justice, knowledge, and forbearance to define it. Regarding justice, he says, justice is a part of wisdom, because a wise person is the one who has respect for the rights of people and thus can be a judge and a good ruler. A wise person also has knowledge, because one cannot judge without knowledge. He also has forbearance and patience; if one rushes in one’s judgment, one cannot reach the truth. A judge who is in a hurry, does not listen properly or does not read the file properly and thus cannot make a proper judgment.

You may have the experience of being a leader or the head of an organization. Being in that position, you find people putting pressure on you to make decisions quickly. They want to rush you, but you must not accept. Let some time pass; gather all the information needed, so that you make a proper decision. They say if you do not decide quickly, a big trouble will happen, but you have to be careful. God will not ask you why you did not make a quick decision when you did not have enough information, but if you do not have enough information and make a decision, God will question you. So, you always need to have time to think, reflect, collect all the information, and listen to the different and even opposing views, not just one side of the story.

The author of *Kitab al-ʿAyn* adds that it is said in Arabic, “Experiences have made so-and-so wise.” Experience is very

important and valuable for ordinary people like us—not for prophets (a) or the Imams (a). It is impossible to have a wise person without experience; nothing can replace experience. You may be a genius, but if you do not have experience, you make funny mistakes. If you choose the best medical student, who is newly graduated from the university, and make him the head of a hospital, he cannot be a good manager. If you bring the best student from the hawzah and appoint him as the imam of an Islamic center, he cannot be a good imam. Experience is so valuable and important.

Majma‘ al-bahrayn is another book, which only interprets the words used in the Quran and hadiths. Explaining Quran 2:269 (“He who is given wisdom is certainly given an abundant good”), al-Turayhi, the author, states that to be given wisdom means to be given knowledge and the ability to act. *Hakim* (the wise) is not the one who just knows; rather, he is the one who knows what to do. Al-Turayhi also mentions that *hikma* is the knowledge which stops one from doing wrong; he reports that Arabs call the snaffle bit “*hakam*,” because, with it, the horse cannot disobey and run away. “*Hikma*” comes from the same root, as it is “the knowledge that stops people from doing wrong” (Turayhi, 1375 sh, 6:45). He also defines *hikma* as “understanding the meanings” (Ibid.).

Another book, which is very much used by scholars, is *al-Mufradat fi gharib al-Quran* by al-Raghib al-Isfahani on the terms used in the Quran. According to this book, *hikma* is to reach the truth with knowledge and intelligence (Raghib al-Isfahani, 1412 AH, 1:249). Based on this definition, knowledge is not enough for *hikma*; it must be accompanied by understanding. A wise person is an intellectual who is thoughtful, not just a person who has memorized something. Al-Raghib adds, God’s wisdom means that God knows how to create things in the best way, human wisdom means knowing what to do to be good, and the Quran’s wisdom is its wise ideas and teachings.

In *Lisan al-‘Arab*, the author writes, “*Hikma* is to know the

best of things with the best of knowledge” (Ibn Manzur, 1993, 12:140). So, a wise person selects; he does not talk about things which are not important; and he teaches you the best ways to achieve the best things. If a wise preacher comes to your community for the month of Ramadan, he first spends some time with the community and finds out what the problems are and what the community is suffering from. So, he finds, for example, that there are ten problems. Then, he identifies two or three problems which are more important than the others and organizes all his lectures around those problems, not just to talk about them, but to give the community the best solutions.

Another definition given in *Lisan al-‘Arab* for *hakim* is the following: “A person who knows all the subtle point of industries and masters them” (Ibid).

And finally, the late Ayatollah Mustafawi, the author of *al-Tahqiq fi kalimat al-Quran*, maintains that *hikma* refers to those judgments which are based on certainty. (Mustafawi, 1385 sh, 2:265) When it is used for judgment, it must be a judgment which is certain. If the judge is not certain, his judgment is not based on *hikma*, and thus it is not wise. So, truth and certainty are essential elements of wisdom. Sometimes you make a judgment which is true, but you are not sure, you are just lucky. That is not *hikma*. If someone asks you, for instance, about the ruling of fasting, it will not be wise for you to just say something without being sure—even if your answer happens to be true. A wise person not only tells the truth but he tells the truth when he is certain about it.

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