

# The Sources of Knowledge and Their Interpretation

**Dr. Ja`far Sheikh Idris**

Lecture Transcript

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Innal hamdalillaahi nahmaduhu wa nasta`eenuhu wa nastaghfiruh, wa na`oodhubillaahi min shuroori anfusinaa wa sayyi'aati a`maalinaa, wa may yahdi llaahu fa huwal muhtad, wa may yudhlil fa lan tajida lahu waliyyan murshidaa, thumma ammaa ba`d:

For us Muslims there are two sources of knowledge:

- | The wahee (revelation), i.e. God's words
- | God's creation

In this we differ with the atheists, the materialists, and all those who don't believe in God or who don't have a reliable book which is the word of God. For them the only source of knowledge is the world, God's creation.

We know that there is something that is called the scientific method. And that is the method which enables us to obtain the facts, the true facts from the world. We as Muslims also believe that there is a method, you can also call it a scientific method, for obtaining the facts from the other source. So just as there is a method, scientific method, which if you follow, then you can obtain the facts from the nature, society etc..there is also a method which must be followed if you want to arrive at reliable facts that are contained in the Qur'aan and the Sunnah of the Prophet sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam.

So these are our two sources. Those sources are reliable for the Muslim. Because Allaah subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa created this world and Allaah subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa revealed the words. So whatever we find by observation, experiment, to be a fact, then a Muslim should not deny that fact. Many people think that for a Muslim only the facts which are stated in the Qur'aan are the true facts. They think that if there is a fact which is scientifically proved, then to accept it - some of them think - you have to find evidence for it in the Qur'aan. No. This is a reliable source, that is a reliable source. We don't have to find evidence for the truth of what Allaah said in nature, neither do we have to find evidence for what is stated in nature in the Qur'aan or the Sunnah of the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam. I am saying, it is not necessary, but sometimes it increases a person's belief, if you find something that Allaah states in the Qur'aan especially if it is something which was not known by people at the time of the Prophet sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam and was discovered only few hundred years later. This then increases a person's faith. It gives him more confidence. He believes in the Qur'aan, but this increases his faith, that this Qur'aan must be from Allaah subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa, otherwise how could anyone at the time of the Prophet know something to be true which would be discovered only in the 20th century so it is not necessary but it helps.

So this is the first point that both these sources are reliable sources. We don't have this

contradiction between science and religion. Allaah subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa said in the Qur'aan: "W'Allaahu akhrajakum mim-buTooni ummahaatikum laa ta'lamoona shay'aa."

When Allaah brought you out of the wombs of your mothers you knew nothing ...Wa ja'ala lakumu-s-sam'a wal-abSaara wal-afi'idah." [An-Nahl 16:78]

...then He provided you with hearing, sight and mind.

So when Allaah created us, when He brought us from the wombs of our mothers, we were ignorant. How do we acquire knowledge by these means? Sense and the mind, there is no other way of acquiring knowledge. Even the knowledge of the Qur'aan, how do we know the Qur'aan? We hear it or we read it, so we have to use our senses. And we have to be reasonable, we have to have reason, be rational. Otherwise you cannot understand any speech, whether it is Allaah's speech or someone else's speech.

We need also these means to acquire knowledge from the nature, so the means by which we acquire knowledge are the same for the religion and for the nature.

What if there is a contradiction between the two. What do we do? Suppose we hear in the Qur'aan or in an authentic hadeeth that so and so is the case. And then the scientists tell us otherwise. The answer is that there cannot be real contradiction. Otherwise this would not be revelation. If Allaah created the world, He knows what He created. And we know for sure, that this Qur'aan is Allaah's Word. And Allaah is not deceptive, He is Truthful. So He cannot create the world in one way and tell us about it in another way. If we know for sure that something is the case in the world, and someone tells us that Allaah tells us otherwise, we say, "No, that is not true."

That is why some of the wise Christians, because of the contradictions like this between the Bible and the definite scientific truths, these Christians, they came to the conclusion that this Bible cannot be the word of God, at least not everything in it. I remember reading an example, someone you see the fundamentalists believe that the Bible is the word of God.

Someone who was an opponent of the fundamentalist, said that there is a verse in the Bible which says that the rabbit chews. He said that this is not true, we know that the rabbit doesn't chew, but it moves its mouth in a way which might seem to a person who is not scientific that it chews just as a camel, say, does. So he said that it is Allaah who created the rabbit so Allaah knows whether the rabbit chews or not. So if someone says that Allaah said that the rabbit chews, then this means that he doesn't know, that the person who said this doesn't know, so this cannot be Allaah subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa.

So the first truth is that there cannot be real contradiction, there cannot be real contradiction. If we know for sure that this is what Allaah said and we know for sure that this is the meaning of what He said, or we know for sure that this is a hadeeth of the Prophet, and we are positive about the meaning of that hadeeth, and also here, we know for sure that this is a scientific fact, it is not a theory, it is a proven fact, then there cannot be any contradiction between the two. So this means that the contradiction has to be apparent.

I am paraphrasing now what Ibn Taymeeyah said. He says, revelation and reason - and instead of reason I am just putting science because for them al-'aql can include this). Now I will ask you another question that might be easy. Suppose we know for sure - and when I say for sure that means that the hadeeth is authentic and that the meaning is also definite - that this is what the

Prophet sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam said. But here there is a theory, one scientist said so and so, but it is not a proven scientific fact. Which one do we prefer, which one do we take? The first one, it is very clear.

Now, suppose it is the other way around. Suppose we know for sure that this is a scientific fact, but we are not sure, say, about the authenticity of the hadeeth, now which one do we prefer? We take the scientific fact, we are sure about it [unlike this particular hadeeth which has not been proven to be definitely authentic, so it is missing one of two conditions: authenticity and clarity of its meaning]. Suppose we are sure about the authenticity of the hadeeth, but we are not very sure about the meaning, and here we are sure, what do we do? Take the scientific fact, again [and use it to clarify the meaning of the authentic hadeeth whose meaning is not certain/definite].

So he said that we prefer whatever is certain/definite (qaTa'ee), something in which there is no doubt. So we prefer this all the time. If one of them, irrespective whether it is revelation or creation, or science, we put the one that is sure or certain before the one in which there is some doubt. Then again he asks a third question. What do we do if neither is certain. We are not very sure, say, about the authenticity or the meaning, and here the scientific evidence is not conclusive. What do we do? He said that at least for the time being, we prefer the one that has more evidence behind it. I am sure that this is not easy to measure, but so we either postpone - we say we don't know - or, if we have to choose, we do what Ibn Taymeeyah said, we take that one which has more evidence to support it.

Now, we as Muslims view the Qur'aan, our approach to the Qur'aan, is in many ways like the approach of the scientist to nature. Suppose that the scientist discovered a certain fact, but then he discovered another fact, which seems to him to contradict the first fact. What does he do? Does he say, this contradiction is inherent in the nature. so there is no use in studying, and I go and do something else?

What does he do, what does he believe in his heart? Why does he go on making research? He thinks that he can reconcile it. He believes that there is no real contradiction in nature. The same thing with the Qur'aan. We come to the Qur'aan, the word of Allaah subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa so there can be no contradiction. So if you find an aayah which seems to you to contradict another aayah or a hadeeth, don't be upset, don't let shaytaan make waswasa (whispering) in your heart.

Say to yourself if a non-believing scientist doesn't have a psychological problem when he finds phenomena which seem to him to be contradictory he doesn't have any problem because he believes, he is positive that this contradiction is only apparent.

For example, I remember once in school the teacher said the first time when the degree at which water boils was discovered, this was in ordinary place this, we say at such and such degree water boils, then some scientists were travelling, they were at a very high place, like a mountain or so. They discovered that water could boil at a lower degree. They didn't say that there is a contradiction, or that there are two laws for water. They continued making research until they discovered there is a relationship between temperature and pressure.

The same applies here, if you find an aayah or a hadeeth which seems to you to contradict another hadeeth or an aayah be sure that the contradiction is only in your head, be sure that this is only due to your ignorance. Be sure there cannot be real contradiction between any two verses of the Qur'aan or any verse of the Qur'aan and an authentic verse of the Prophet or any two authentic hadeeths of the Prophet. There are many ways of reconciling the seemingly contradicting statements.

Scientists have theories, they don't rely only on individual facts. They have theories which explain the facts. We have something very similar also. And this is what they call fiqh. A faqeeh is not someone who just knows different rulings on different matters, that the ruling here is this, that the ruling here is that. No, a faqeeh is someone who has a comprehensive view of the religion, he knows that in religion there are things, like laws, which govern these individual facts and truths, so he views these individual facts in the light of these main and comprehensive statements that are found in the Qur'aan or the Sunnah of the Prophet sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, or sometimes the statements that are formulated by the 'ulamaa themselves. And this is what you find in usool ul-fiqh. So this is our approach to the Qur'aan and the Sunnah of the Prophet sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam.

Now we come to what I call the scientific method. What is the method that enables us to get at the true meaning of the Qur'aan or the Sunnah of the Prophet salallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam?

The first one is language. The difference between revelation and creation is that creation are things, so the method that suits them is observation. You hear or you see something. Here - in the case of revelation, we have words, and the most important thing about understanding words is to understand the language. So you find it repeated in many verses in the Qur'aan that this is an Arabic Qur'aan. You can see that it is in Arabic, but Allaah subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa stated this fact. It is obvious but He repeated it so that no one can interpret the Qur'aan in a way which contradicts the Arabic language.

So the Qur'aan is Arabic, therefore the first requirement for understanding the Qur'aan is to understand the Arabic language. This is for someone - not for someone who relies on translation, of course, because translation itself is based on the understanding - we are talking about someone who wants to go directly to the Qur'aan. Otherwise there are Arabic speaking people who cannot go directly to the Qur'aan, they have to depend on what the 'ulamaa say, the 'ulamaa who understood the Arabic language of the Qur'aan because the Arabic language of the Qur'aan is not the Arabic that we use in our every day life. I speak Arabic, but I have to read tafseer. There is many words whose meaning is not familiar to Arabic speaking people so they have to go to the dictionaries or commentaries on the Qur'aan. But this is very important, that this Qur'aan is Arabic, and the Arabic of the Qur'aan is the Arabic which was spoken at the time of the Prophet sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam. We who speaks modern Arabic sometimes makes mistakes which a person who reads a translation doesn't make. Why? Because some of these words that are used in the Qur'aan acquire new meanings, that were not known at the time of the Prophet, so many of us when we read, we give a word of the Qur'aan the modern meaning which is very different from the original classical meaning.

So we have to interpret the Qur'aan according to the Arabic language which was spoken at the time of the Prophet sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam. Not any Arabic that was spoken after the time of the Prophet sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam.

Many of the people who deviated, who gave the Qur'aan the meanings which are not true, they violated this first rule. They had to. If you want to make any distortions in the Qur'aan then you have to violate the Arabic language. Many of the people like the mutasawwifa, some of the mu'tazila, even some contemporary people whom we call "modernists", who want to interpret the Qur'aan to make it compatible with some western views, they have to deviate from this.

The second requirement is what we call "tafseerun-nassi bin-nass." Nass is a statement. Statement in the Qur'aan must be interpreted, after we know the general Arabic meaning, by

going to the Qur'aan itself. Because the Qur'aan, as they say in Arabic, "yufassiru ba'duhu ba'dan," that the Qur'aan itself explains the Qur'aan. So you find something stated in very general terms in one verse, then it is explained in details in another verse. So you say the meaning of this aayah is this aayah.

The same applies to the hadeeth of the Prophet, we interpret the Qur'aan in the light of the hadeeth of the Prophet, because the Qur'aan itself tells us that the task of the Prophet sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam is to interpret the Qur'aan, to explain the Qur'aan. He explained the Qur'aan by his words and by his deeds. So we know for sure that whatever the Prophet says does not contradict any verse in the Qur'aan, because his task, his duty is to explain the Qur'aan, not to contradict it. And we know for sure that whatever the Prophet did is something which at least is allowed in the Qur'aan. So if the Prophet does something, then we don't accept the claim of anyone that says this is haraam in the Qur'aan. So we interpret the Qur'aan in the light of the Qur'aan, we interpret the Qur'aan in the light of Sunnah, we interpret the Sunnah in the light of the Sunnah.

The third requirement for a proper understanding of the Qur'aan is the sayings, the commentaries, the explanations of the Companions of the Prophet. They have a special position, not because we believe that they are ma'soomeen, infallible, but for a very good reason: Firstly because the language of the Qur'aan is the language which they used to speak in their every-day life, the classical language, so they understood it better than the later generations.

Secondly, because they lived with the Prophet sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, they knew the occasions, the circumstances in which the verses of the Qur'aan were revealed. And thirdly, because it might be that the meaning which they attribute to the Qur'aan might be something that they understood from the Prophet sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, even if they didn't quote the Prophet. But this is what they understood for him. And fourthly, because they are the best of the muslims, they are not like the Prophet, they are not infallible, but they are the best of Muslims.

So we know that none of them would say that this verse is so and so if he is not sure that this is the meaning and if he is not sure, he would say, "I am not sure." If he knows, he would say, "I think it is so and so". So this is the third requirement...

If there is concensus, ijmaa', that has to be taken to be the meaning of the aayah or the hadeeth of the Prophet sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam. There is also what is called Qiyaas. Qiyaas is not a means of obtaining facts directly from the Qur'aan but it is a way of knowing the ruling, the "hukm", of something which is not mentioned specifically in the Qur'aan. Qiyaas - as the word analogy explains: We read in the Qur'aan and the Hadeeth that the ruling on A is B. Now, we find something X which is similar to A. So we say that the ruling on this X is also B, because of the similarity between the two. This is what they call Qiyaas.

The sixth - a very important requirement - is sincerity. Any person, even if he is not a Muslim, he can master the language, he can read and learn by heart the ahaadeeth of the Prophet, or the verses from the Qur'aan, he can know the superficial meaning of these verses, but Allaah subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa will not give the real meaning, the meaning that influences a person's life and gives him hidaayah, guidance, Allaah subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa will not give that except to someone who is sincere.

We do our best to acquire all the necessary means of understanding the Qur'aan and the Sunnah of the Prophet sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, we try you learn Arabic, we think and ponder over the verses, we read as many as ahaadeth of the Prophet sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, we read the

sayings of the Companions, so we do our best, but that is not enough. We have to also pray to Allah subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa to give us knowledge, we have to be very sincere.

Ibn Taymeeyah said, "I used to read a 100 tafaseer on one verse then I would go to the mosque and say, Yaa mu'allimul khaleeli 'alimnee. O you who taught Ibraaheem, khaleel, teach me. It is because of this that our great 'ulamaa acquired this vast knowledge that they acquired. They did not only learn the ahaadeeth and the verses by the heart, they did not only learn the rulings on individual matters, but Allaah gave them fiqh, this comprehensive knowledge of the Qur'aan and of the Sunnah of the Prophet sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam.

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