Concept of Reason in the Holy Qur’an: A Study of Some Selected Verses
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Introduction

Man has been given the knowledge which even angels do not possess (Quran, 2:32). It is because of knowledge that man is superior to all other creatures. The objective of the pursuit of knowledge is to get closer to a true representation, understanding and explanation of the reality. To achieve this knowledge one needs to ascertain the sources from where it can be acquired. In Islam, reason and revelation are considered as mutually exclusive sources of Knowledge. Reason presents a fruitful approach to the use of revelation as a source of knowledge. Allah has endowed man with the power of intellect and the importance of rational thinking and intellection is highlighted in the primary sources of Islam, namely the Quran and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The Quran designates reason as a supportive aid to man (Quran, 2:260). The Prophetic traditions regarding the importance of intellect read as: “Allah has created nothing more honorable than intellect”; “Every child is born with a sound human nature (fitrah)…”, etc. But in the course of acquiring knowledge about the reality by means of reason, one ought to remember its subservience to revelation and not the vice versa. Notwithstanding the veracity of rational knowledge, revelation is necessary for imparting this knowledge to all mankind. In the words of al-Kindi: “Every Prophet is a hakim but not every hakim a Prophet”. In this paper, the different definitions of reason by Islamic scholars are highlighted followed by a discussion on the Qur’anic usage of reason and its significance in the light of some selected Qur’anic verses.

Keywords: Holy Qur’an, Knowledge, ‘Aql, Reason, Intellect, Revelation.

Definitions of Reason in the Muslim Scholarship

The Arabic version of the term ‘reason’ or ‘intellect’ is ‘‘Aql’. The term ‘Aql is related to the verb ‘ya’qul’, meaning reason, rationality, intellect or intelligence, the

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antonym of which is ‘hamaqat’ (stupidity or foolishness). Mohd ibn Qasim-al-Anbari (850-940), a famous Iraqi exegete, grammarian and Arabic linguist says that al-Āqil (intelligent, sane or wise person) is the one who fastens to his ideas and actions after careful excogitation, derived from one’s statement. Thalabi (d.1035) has further elaborated this meaning, stating that the synonym of al-Aql is al-Man’, meaning the act of preventing, with-holding or restraining something from one’s saying. Al-Āqil (wise), therefore, is the one who withholds or restrains himself from doing that which is not suitable and befitting.

The early Muslim scholars from among the Companions of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and their disciples all gave various but related meanings of al-‘Aql which are summarized by ibn al-Jawzi (1116-1201) in his book al-Adhkiya’ in the following four points:

1. The first meaning is that which is used to describe that innate property of person wherewith, man is prepared to receive, understand and synthesize information as what distinguishes him from other living animals. This is the purport of what scholars such as Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (780-855) and al-Muhasibi (781-857) stated, who respectively described al-Aql as innate property of man, or an inborn light by which one is prepared to perceive things.

2. The second meaning implies that which is used to designate self-evident things, the axiomatic truth (Ilm al-Daruri) in which both intelligent and dull-witted people are on same level with one another.

3. The third meaning of al-Aql cited by him is that, which is gained through experience and the newly acquired experience is called Aql.

4. The last meaning implies the inherent principle, by which one restrains his own self from his heart’s vain desires.

In view of these meanings, al-Aql generally centers on two things: the knowledge of merit and demerit of things and then acting upon that knowledge. A person who grasps the benefits and harms of things, but does not act upon the knowledge acquired by him is not wise; the term al-Aql, therefore, does not suit him. To this end, al-Aql implies the intellectual ability to comprehend the evidence to factual knowledge in an
information or message received or discovered. It is used also to distinguish wisdom from folly, which is the ability in man to be guided by the rule of wisdom.\(^9\) The corollary is that the main purpose of reason as the autonomous nature of human beings and the revelation from Allah upon the Prophets coincides, as according to Sayyid Mawdudi, the main purpose of the Quran is to distinguish right from wrong, to guide human beings and to invite them towards the right path\(^10\). That is why, most of the Muslim scholars and philosophers are of the opinion that reason and revelation are complementary to each other.

The knowledge acquired through reason is known as *Ilm al-yaqin* (the knowledge of certainty or certainty due to acquired knowledge), meaning knowledge by inference resulting from man’s power of evaluation and judgement. It is logical, mathematical and empirical knowledge. It depends upon the truth of its assumptions as in deduction. As Allah says in the Holy Quran: “And yet if you knew with positive knowledge (the end result of piling up, you would not have occupied yourselves in worldly things.”\(^11\)

**The Quranic Perspective on Reason and its Uses**

The Holy Quran does not acclaim reason as a self-sufficient and intangible organ\(^12\), rather, it is the quality, property, power and capacity of reasoning and intellection in a particular person. Intellection becomes perfect when a person reasons upon things and then acts upon what he reasons.\(^13\) It is the capacity to discover truth by doubting all that can be doubted and then building a structure of deductive truths using the remaining concrete axioms as a foundation.\(^14\) The Holy Qur’an does not make a demand on man to believe blindly, rather, it prescribes the modes of thought and rational conduct to him. The Holy Qur’an appeals to man’s faculties of thinking, reasoning and understanding as implied, respectively, by the terms *Tadabbur*\(^15\), *Tafakkur*\(^16\) and *Ta’qqu’il*\(^17\). The word *albab* (minds) appears 16 times and the word ‘*Aql*’ (reason) and its derivatives occur 49 times in the Quran.\(^18\) This reflects a recurrent Qur’anic invitation to man to apply his critical mental faculty to attain knowledge. The Holy Qur’an in its eloquent style calls upon people to apply reason, because reasoning
is the most courteous manner. From beginning to end, the Quran uses the verbs of ‘reflection’ and ‘consideration.’ The Quranic mandate on prescribing the use of the intellect is a central religious obligation. The Quran condemns the disbeliever as an unintelligent and irrational, a dumb animal who fails to reason and to ponder upon the signs of Allah. The devout believer engages in ‘deep reflection’ (tadabbur, hyperbolic form meaning ‘to meditate earnestly’; yaddabbarun):

We have sent down a Book to you which is blessed, so that people may apply their minds to its revelations, and the men of wisdom may reflect.19

And they will say: “Had we been listening or understanding, we would not have been among the people of the Hell.” 20

The Quran has a special reason for endorsing the paramount role of reason in the life of Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). His pagan compatriots noticed that the Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) brought no miracles of the older dramatic type.21 The Holy Quran does not deny this but instead counters their demand on the grounds that the earlier miracles were also rejected in their time. In response, the Holy Quran records the miracles performed by Moses, Abraham, Jesus, John and other prophets and projects the Arabic scripture given to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as a sufficient miracle of reason and speech.22 The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was asked by the disbelievers to bring the dead back to life, to resurrect the pagans’ forefathers and to use the Qur’an to make the dead speak. These were reasonable requests in an age when everyone expected marvelous and supernatural occurrences. The Prophet does not (or cannot) resurrect the dead. The Quran, like the New Testament, complains that such dramatic signs will be in any case dismissed by the disbelievers as mere magic and that only the wicked demand special signs and portents.23 If the dead generations, the pagan forefathers of Muhammad’s (pbuh) contemporaries, are not to be resurrected, then there is an increased need to offer impressive reasons for the possibility of the resurrection transpiring in the future lives of the pagans. The objection to resurrection was made continually by Holy Prophet Muhammad’s (pbuh) enemies; the challenge remained unanswered on their terms. But in reply the Quranic contention is the argument from
analogy with the dead earth which is revived periodically by rainfall from the sky: “And it is among His signs that He shows you the lightening which causes fear and hope, and that He sends down water from the sky, then He revives the earth with it after its death. Surely in this there are signs for a people who understand.”

Again, Allah who can create a human being from ‘nothing’ or ‘a base fluid emitted’ (“He is created of spouting water”25) can surely bring that human being back to life. The Quran claims to have provided every type of parable to teach the truth to the rebels: “He said: So it is; your Lord said: it is easy for Me, and I did create you before, when you were nothing.”26 Indeed the pagans noticed that many of the Quran’s parables and verses even referred to insignificant creatures, such as a fly: “Indeed, Allah does not feel shy in citing any parable, be it that of a gnat or of something above it (in meanness). Now, as for those who believe, they know it is the truth from their Lord; while those who disbelieve say: What could Allah have meant by this parable? By this He lets many go astray, and by this He makes many find guidance. But He does not let anyone go astray thereby except those who are sinful.”27

At another place in the Qur’an, the falsehood of polytheism has been explained by way of an analogy to the web of a spider: “The example of those who have adopted patrons other than Allah is like the spider that has made a house, while indeed the weakest of houses is the house of the spider. If only they know.”28 Also, the Qur’an leads its readers to reflect consciously upon ants29, bees30 and the edible food items: “And from the fruits of date palms and grape vines, you obtain intoxicants, and good provision. Surely, in that there is a sign for a people who understand”.31 Thus, instead of meeting the demands of the disbelievers for the sensual miracles, the Qur’an asks them to use their faculties of reasoning and intellection in pondering upon the God’s creation surrounding them; they are no less than miracles in leading one to their Creator.

Reason Illumines the Soul

It is the reason that illuminates the soul and the illumined soul yearns for union with Allah,32 which is its ultimate end. The Quran presents the human reason as a supportive aid to Prophet Ibrahim (pbuh) who used it against his people, mocked their
idol-worship and thus, defeated them in debate through reasoning. The Quranic Ibrahim (pbuh) is a venerable figure who is portrayed as both a man of faith and as a curious searcher who once requests Allah to show him how He gives life to the dead. Allah says in the Holy Qur’an:

(Remember) when Ibrahim said: My Lord, show me how You give life to the dead.
He said: “Is it that you do not believe?” He said: “Of course, I do, but it is just to make my heart at peace.” He said: “Then take four birds and tame them to your call, then put on every mountain a part from them, then give them a call, and they shall come to you rushing, and know that Allah is Mighty, Wise.”

This occurs when the display of the proofs and the abundance of ways to knowledge set the mind at rest and bring to end the disquiet of the heart. Prophet Ibrahim (pbuh) is divinely aided in his arguments against his pagan community, but appears also as an empiricist natural philosopher making independent inferences from observations of heavenly bodies and their patterns of setting and rising. The Prophet Ibrahim (pbuh) watches the events in nature, noticing their finitude and limitation. He adores the temporary greatness of the rising sun. But as the sun sets, he deduces, by elimination, the illimitable greatness of Allah. He argues with a sceptic king (Nimrod) about the divine cause behind the rising and the setting of the sun, as mentioned in Quran:

Do you not know the one who argued with Ibrahim about his Lord, because Allah had given him kingship? When Ibrahim said: “My Lord is the One Who gives life and brings death,” he said: “I give life and I bring death.” Ibrahim said: “Allah brings the sun out from the East; now, you bring it out from the West.” Here, baffled was the one who disbelieved, and Allah does not bring the wrongdoers to the right path.

Armed with an empirically grounded certainty of faith, he argued with his people, the king and the guardians of the temple where the idols were kept. He argued with his father and his fellow men that the gods they had made were false and that they were not on the right path. Predictably, the pagans, frustrated by his intellectual
acumen, threw him into a raging fire, but Allah ordered the fire to be a cool refuge for his Prophet: “We said: O fire, be cold and safe for Ibrahim.”

Reasoning for the support of revelation is encouraged in Islam, but at the same time, the Quran warns the human beings about Allah’s power and asks them to meditate on the Quran’s inimitability; a simultaneous address to reason and revelation: “And if you doubt the revelations sent to our servant [Muhammad (pbuh)], then bring a chapter similar to it. But if you cannot, and you certainly cannot, then fear the fire whose fuel is humankind and stones, prepared for disbelievers.”

From the above verses, al-‘Aql (Reason, Intellect) can be construed as an inherent nature and quality in a person, given to him by Allah, the Exalted, by which he acquires knowledge of perfectness and defectiveness of things. His action in this regard is guided by the rule of wisdom. Reason should not imply what philosophers speak of abstract intellects; it is illusions and conjectures of the peripatetic philosophy, diving without guidance.

So, knowledge results from the functioning of reason or intellect (‘Aql) which is the innate rational faculty of man, the faculty which distinguishes him from animals, because it is the source of knowledge which animals are deprived of. The intellect and knowledge evolve with age. Along with revelation, intuition and experience, the intellect leads to the growth of knowledge.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the Qur’an, though a revelation in itself, does not discredit reason. Rather, it frequently and recurrently calls upon its readers to use their God-given faculties of reason and intellection to arrive at the truth of the revelation. Likewise, the Qur’an praises the people of intellect and derides the disbelievers by likening them to deaf and dumb animals devoid of understanding. The Qur’an also provides an account of the Prophets’ debates with their disbelieving communities which are reflective of their (the Prophets’) rational and
intellectual approach. Moreover, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) also has emphasized the role of reason in understanding the truth and the reality. Thus, though subservient to revelation, reason holds a place of prestige in the foundational Islamic sources, the Qur’an and Sunnah.
References


4 Abu Ishaq Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Nisaburi al-Thalabi was an eleventh century Islamic scholar of Persia, known for his tafsir of the Quran titled as al-Kashf wa al-Bayan ‘an Tafsir al-Quran, which is a classical tafsir. It is also known as Tafsir al-Thalabi.

5 Abd-al-Rehman bin Ali bin Muhammad Abu-l-Faraj bin-al-Jawzi often referred as ibn al-Jawzi was an Arab Muslim juris-consult, preacher, orator, heresiographer, traditionist, judge, hagiographer and philologist who played an important role in propagating the Hanbali School of orthodox Sunni jurisprudence in his native Baghdad during the 12th century.

6 Iman Ahmad Ibn Hanbal was an Arab Muslim jurist, theologian, ascetic, hadith traditionist and founder of the Hanbali School of Sunni jurisprudence, one of the four major orthodox legal schools of Sunni Islam.

7 Abu Abdullah Harith bin Asad al-Basri. Muhasibi was his title which means self-inspection/audit. It was his characteristic property. He was the founder of Baghdad School of Islamic Philosophy and the teacher of the sufi masters Junayd al-Baghdadi and Sirri Saqti.

8 Yusuf Dalhat, op.cit., pp.77-78.

9 Idem.


13 Yusuf Dalhat, op.cit., p.77.


15 The Holy Quran, Surah al-Sad 38: 29.


19 The Holy Quran, Surah al-Sad 38: 29.


36 The Holy Quran, Surah al-Baqarah 2: 258.

37 The Holy Quran, Surah al-An’am 6: 74.


40 Yusuf Dalhat, *op.cit.*, p.79.