103146 - Verses that are entirely clear (muhkam) and verses that are not entirely clear (mutashaabih) in the Holy Qur'aan

the question

What is the meaning of the words of Allaah (interpretation of the meaning): "In it are Verses that are entirely clear, they are the foundations of the Book; and others not entirely clear…"? What should a person do if he is confused because of something unclear in a verse that is not entirely clear?.

Detailed answer

Firstly:

Allaah says (interpretation of the meaning):

"It is He Who has sent down to you (Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم) the Book (this Qur'aan). In it are Verses that are entirely clear, they are the foundations of the Book [and those are the Verses of Al-Ahkaam (commandments), Al-Faraa'id (obligatory duties) and Al-Hudood (laws for the punishment of thieves, adulterers)]; and others not entirely clear. So as for those in whose hearts there is a deviation (from the truth) they follow that which is not entirely clear thereof, seeking Al-Fitnah (polytheism and trials), and seeking for its hidden meanings, but none knows its hidden meanings save Allaah. And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: "We believe in it; the whole of it (clear and unclear Verses) are from our Lord." And none receive admonition except men of understanding"

[Aal 'Imraan 3:7]

What is meant is that the Qur'aan contains verses that are entirely clear and verses that are not entirely clear. The entirely clear verses (muhkam) are those which are clear and concerning which there is no confusion; this applies to most of the verses of the Qur'aan. These verses are the "foundations of the Book". As for the verses which are not entirely clear (mutashaabih)

these are verses which may not be clear to some people, in exclusion to others. The scholars know them but the ignorant do not, and there are some which only Allaah knows.

Those who follow the truth refer the verses which are not entirely clear to the verses which are entirely clear, whereas those who follow deviation follow the verses which are not entirely clear, and they use the verses which are not entirely clear to contradict the verses which are entirely clear, for the purpose of creating confusion, distorting and misleading.

Ibn Katheer (may Allaah have mercy on him) said in his Tafseer (2/6): Allaah tells us that in the Qur'aan there are verses which are entirely clear, which are the foundation of the Book, i.e., they are clear in meaning, with no confusion for anyone; and there are other verses which are not entirely clear as to what they mean for many or some people. The one who refers that which is unclear to him to that which is clear, and uses the clear verses to understand what is not clear to him, will be guided. But the one who does the opposite will be misguided. Hence Allaah says: "It is He Who has sent down to you (Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم) the Book (this Qur'aan). In it are Verses that are entirely clear, they are the foundations of the Book" i.e., they are the root to which reference should be made in the event of confusion; "and others not entirely clear" i.e., they could be interpreted in accordance with those that are entirely clear or they could be interpreted in some other way, based on the wording and the way they are written, not according to the meaning.

"So as for those in whose hearts there is a deviation", i.e., misguidance, and ignoring the truth in favour of falsehood, "they follow that which is not entirely clear thereof" i.e., they interpret that which is not entirely clear in such a way that allows them to distort it to suit their corrupt aims, because the wording could be interpreted in the way they want. But in the case of the verses which are entirely clear, they have no chance of doing that, so that is clear proof against them. Hence Allaah says: "seeking Al-Fitnah (polytheism and trials)" i.e., to misguide their followers and give them the impression that they are using evidence from the Qur'aan to support their bid'ah (innovation). This is evidence against them, not for them. It is similar to when the Christians argue that the Qur'aan says that 'Eesa (Jesus) is a Spirit from God and His Word that

He bestowed upon Maryam (Mary), but they ignore the verses in which Allaah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“He [‘Eesa (Jesus)] was not more than a slave. We granted Our Favour to him …”

[al-Zukhruf 43:59]

“Verily, the likeness of ‘Eesa (Jesus) before Allaah is the likeness of Adam. He created him from dust, then (He) said to him: ‘Be!’ — and he was”

[Aal ‘Imraan 3:59]

-- and other clear verses which unambiguously show that he was one of the creatures created by Allaah, and a slave of Allaah, and one of the Messengers of Allaah.

And the words “and seeking for its hidden meanings” mean, they distort it as they wish.

End quote.

Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen (may Allaah have mercy on him) said:

Allaah, may He be blessed and exalted, has divided the Holy Qur’aan into two categories: the verses which are entirely clear and those which are not entirely clear. What is meant by those which are entirely clear is that the meaning is clear and obvious to everyone, like the heavens and earth, stars, mountains, trees, animals and so on. This is entirely clear because there is no ambiguity in its meaning. The verses which are not entirely clear are those of which the meaning is ambiguous or unknown to most people, and is known only to those who are well-versed in knowledge, such as some verses which are general in meaning and do not give details, but they are explained in detail in the Sunnah. An example is the verse in which Allaah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And perform As-Salaah [prayer]”

[al-Baqarah 2:43].

How prayer is to be performed is not known from this verse; all that is known from it is that it is obligatory to perform prayer. But how that is to be done is known from other evidence. The wisdom behind the fact that the Qur'aan was revealed with verses of these two types is that this is a test, because those in whose hearts is deviation will follow that which is not entirely clear and will thus remain confused. But those who are well-versed in knowledge believe in all of it, both that which is not entirely clear and that which is entirely clear; they know that it is from Allaah and that there is no contradiction in it. An example of verses that are not entirely clear are the verses in which Allaah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“There will then be (left) no Fitnah (excuses or statements or arguments) for them but to say: ‘By Allaah, our Lord, we were not those who joined others in worship with Allaah’”

[al-An’aam 6:23].

“On that day those who disbelieved and disobeyed the Messenger (Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم) will wish that they were buried in the earth, but they will never be able to hide a single fact from Allaah”

[al-Nisa’ 4:42]

Someone may come along and say that they contradict one another. How can they say “By Allaah, our Lord, we were not those who joined others in worship with Allaah”, then it is said of them that “they will never be able to hide a single fact from Allaah”? They quote the verses against one another in order to confuse people. But those who are well-versed in knowledge say: It is all from Allaah and there is no contradiction in the words of Allaah. They said: The Day of Resurrection will be as long as fifty thousand years, and things will change throughout that Day. The first verse is applicable to one stage and the second verse is applicable to another.

End quote from Fataawa Noor ‘ala al-Darb.

And he also said: As for the people of misguidance and deviance, they followed the verses which are not entirely clear and made them a cause to create doubt and suspicion, so they were

misguided and misguided others. They imagined, on the basis of verses that are not entirely clear, something that is not befitting to Allaah or His Book or His Messenger.

An example of the first is the verses in which Allaah says (interpretation of the meaning): “Verily, We give life to the dead” [Yaa-Seen 36:12] and “Verily, We, it is We Who have sent down the Dhikr (i.e. the Qur’aan) and surely, We will guard it (from corruption)” [al-Hijr 15:9] – and other verses in which Allaah attributes something to Himself using the plural pronoun (We). The Christians followed that which is not entirely clear and claimed a plurality of gods, saying that Allaah is the third of three, and they ignored that which is entirely clear and indicates that Allaah is One.

But those who are well-versed in knowledge interpreted the plural pronoun as being in terms of respect for the numerous attributes of Allaah and their greatness. They referred the verses that are not entirely clear to that which is entirely clear (interpretation of the meaning): “And your Ilaah (God) is One Ilaah (God — Allaah), Laa Ilaaha illa Huwa (there is none who has the right to be worshipped but He)” [al-Baqarah 2:163]. So they say to the Christians: The claim you make is because of the confusion that you have, so Allaah has deemed you to be kaafirs (disbelievers) and has rejected your claim when you said that. Listen to the verse in which Allaah says (interpretation of the meaning): “Surely, disbelievers are those who said: “Allaah is the third of the three (in a Trinity).” But there is no Ilaah (god) (none who has the right to be worshipped) but One Ilaah (God —Allaah)” [al-Maa'idah 5:73] i.e., they disbelieved when they said that God is the third of three.

An example of the second is the verses in which Allaah says to His Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) (interpretation of the meaning):

“Verily, you (O Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم) guide not whom you like”

[al-Qasas 28:56].

And

“And verily, you (O Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم) are indeed guiding (mankind) to the Straight Path (i.e. Allaah’s religion of Islamic Monotheism)”

[al-Shoora 42:52].

In these two verses there is an imagined contradiction, so the one who has deviation in his heart may think that they contradict one another, because in the first verse there is a negation and in the second there is an affirmation. So he thinks that there is a contradiction in the Qur’aan.

But those who are well-versed in knowledge say that there is no contradiction between these two verses, because what is meant by guidance in the first verse is guidance by means of divine help or inspiration, which no one has control over except Allaah alone; neither the Messenger nor anyone else has any power over that. And what is meant by guidance in the second verse is guidance on the basis of evidence and proof, which may come from Allaah or from others, so it may come from the Messengers and their heirs, meaning the sincere scholars.

End quote from Majmoo’ Fataawa al-Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen (4/186).

These are all examples of relative ambiguity which some people may not be able to understand, but those who are well-versed in knowledge understand it. As for the verses which are not entirely clear and which no one knows except Allaah, these have to do with matters such as the essence and nature of Allaah’s attributes, or the essence of what is with Allaah of the delight of the people of Paradise and the torment for those who disobey Him. All of that is known to no one except Allaah.

Secondly:

Whoever is confused about any of the verses which are not entirely clear should try to understand it in the light of that which is entirely clear, if he is a scholar who is able to use evidence in order to reach conclusions. Otherwise he should ask the scholars, as Allaah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“So ask of those who know the Scripture, if you know not”

[al-Nahl 16:43].

Whatever the case, let him say (interpretation of the meaning): “We believe in it; the whole of it (clear and unclear Verses) are from our Lord”

[Aal ‘Imraan 3:7].

Some of the heretics and deviants, in the past and in modern times, tried to seek out everything in the Qur'aan and Sunnah that is not entirely clear (al-mutashaabih), for the purpose of creating confusion and doubt.. But the scholars rose to this challenge and wrote beneficial books which refute these doubts. An example of that is the book which was written by Ibn Qutaybah (may Allaah have mercy on him), entitled Ta’weel Mukhtalif al-Hadeeth; and the book by Shaykh al-Ameen al-Shanqeeti (may Allaah have mercy on him) entitled Daf’ Eehaam al-Idtiraab ‘an Aayi’l-Kitaab.

, there is no contradiction between the verses of the Qur’aan, or between the Sunnah and the Qur’aan, because it is all from Allaah, and Allaah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Do they not then consider the Qur’aan carefully? Had it been from other than Allaah, they would surely, have found therein many a contradiction”

[al-Nisa’ 4:82].

We ask Allaah to guide us and you and to grant us all beneficial knowledge and enable us all to do righteous deeds.

And Allaah knows best.