
Parables in the Qur'ān and the Bible: A view in Modern Epistemology

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ABSTRACT

Allah the Almighty is the Creator and Sustainer of all the worlds. He has created mankind from a drop of sperm (zygote). He has passed this zygote through different phases in the womb of mother and brings a complete human being from it. He has declared mankind His best creation among all the creations. As, He is the Creator of the mankind, He loves them more than anyone, He knows the psychology of human beings. For the sake of progress and tranquility of mankind in both worlds He always sends His Apostles for their enlightenment. The main fidelity of these Apostles was to transform the Divine language into human language. These Apostles have adopted different methods of teaching for human contemplation under the light of Divine instructions. Parabolic method is one of these methods embraced by the Apostles of Allah to teach human beings. Teaching through the parables is the Sunna of Allah. It is the convention of Allah that has remained continued generation after generation.

Key Words: The Quran, The Bible, Parables, Psychology, Philosophy, Epistemology

The parables are found in the Holy Scriptures of Sematic Religions. To understand the concept of the parables few definitions are mentioned below. These definitions are taken from the literature of Sematic Religions. Shahid Rasul summarizes the concept of the Qur'ānic parables as:

“The parables of the Qur'ān help in inculcating the right concept of Allah in the minds of the readers; make ethical and spiritual principles comprehensible to common man; they distinct reality from falsehood;

reveal divine truth and make it more meaningful to the reader.”¹

William Smith in his dictionary of the Bible defines parable as follows:

“The parable can be well-defined as a brief story told in a way of analogy to demonstrate a principal truth”.

“A parable can also be defined as an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.”²

Parables in the Old Testament

Jesus was not the first Prophet who had taught humanity by using parabolic method.³ Parables are also present in the Old Testament. These parables support this point of view that teaching through parables was the custom and practice of all the Prophets. Scholars have recorded 7 parables in different books of the Old Testament.⁴ There is also a chapter with the name of ‘Proverbs’ (parables) in the Old Testament.⁵

Parables in the New Testament

There are different opinions of scholars of the New Testament regarding the exact number of the parables. Around 39 parables are recorded in the New Testament.⁶ These parables are recorded in the Gospel of Mathew, Mark and Luke. The parable is a prime genre of the Bible and assuredly the central form of Jesus teachings. The main teachings of Jesus are illustrated in the form of the parables. One can understand the importance of the parables by the number for which these are used in the Bible by Jesus. There is an immense literature on the significance and importance of the parables as it comprises about one third of the teachings and edifications of the Jesus.⁷

In every era, scholars have showed light on different aspects of the parables and also on the prominence of understanding them. Anyone who wants to seek the teachings of the Jesus, he is bound to learn them through the parables. The parables of Jesus are the soul and core of his teachings. There is a saying of Jesus regarding the significance of the parables:

*“I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world.”*⁸

An example of the New Testament’s parable is given below.

Parable of the Lost Sheep

Jesus explains the love of God for His creation in this parable. He said that if a shepherd has 100 sheep’s who he looks after if 1 of them would lose, the shepherd would leave the 99 others and go after the misplaced one. Jesus stresses that once he found the lost sheep he will rejoice over it more than the 99

who did not pass off target. This is how God responds whilst a sinner returns to Him.⁹

Parable of the Sower, The Women and the Leaven, Treasure hidden in the field, The Lost coin and the Goats are among the famous parables of the New Testament.

Parables in the Qur'ān

There are numerous parables in the Qur'ān of different types. Different numbers of the parables are recorded by the scholars of the Qur'ān. Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri has recorded 35 parables in his Qur'ānic Encyclopaedia.¹⁰ Allah the Almighty has mentioned the significance and persistence of parables in several verses.

وَتِلْكَ الْأَمْثَالُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

“And We give these examples [Parable] for the people so that they may ponder.”¹¹

Allah the Almighty has stated that parables have been abundantly mentioned in the Qur'ān. The aim of the parables is not just to tell a story but to teach the lessons of spiritual wisdom.

ضَرَبَ لَكُمْ مَثَلًا مِّنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ

“Allah the Almighty sets forth for you an illustration [parable] taken from your personal lives.”¹²

The Qur'ānic statements are in a language comprehensible to man and within the sphere of his observation and knowledge. That is why nobody should have any difficulty in understanding them. In this parable, it has been elucidated that the principle of the Monotheism (Oneness of Allah) as compared to polytheism is more rational and reliable with nature.

Parables in Hadith

The Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also used parabolic method for the edification of his Ummah. Several parables have been recorded in the narrations of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). He has discussed the significance of the Qur'ānic parables in the following words.

نَزَلَ الْقُرْآنُ عَلَى خَمْسَةِ أَوْجُهٍ: حَلَالٍ وَحَرَامٍ وَمُحْكَمٍ وَمُتَشَابِهٍ وَأَمْثَالٍ. فَأَحْلُوا

الْحَلَالَ وَحَرِّمُوا الْحَرَامَ وَاعْمَلُوا بِالْمُحْكَمِ وَأَمِنُوا بِالْمُتَشَابِهِ وَاعْتَبِرُوا بِالْأَمْثَالِ

“The Qur'ān has been descended on five aspects: ḥalāl (permissible), ḥarām (forbidden), muḥkam (categorical verses), mutashābihāt (allegorical verses) and the parables. So treat what is permissible

as permissible and avoid the ḥarām (forbidden) and follow the arbitrator and believed in the allegorical verses and contemplate the parables.”¹³

An example of the parable from the Qur'an will be discussed here.

The parable of Fire and Water

أَنْزَلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً فَسَالَتْ أَوْدِيَةٌ بِقَدَرِهَا فَاحْتَمَلَ السَّيْلُ زَبَدًا رَابِيًا وَمِمَّا يُوقِدُونَ عَلَيْهِ فِي النَّارِ ابْتِغَاءَ حِلْيَةٍ أَوْ مَتَاعٍ زَبَدٌ مِثْلُهٗ كَذَٰلِكَ يَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْحَقَّ وَالْبَاطِلَ فَأَمَّا الزَّبَدُ فَيَذْهَبُ جُفَاءً وَأَمَّا مَا يَنْفَعُ النَّاسَ فَيَمْكُثُ فِي الْأَرْضِ كَذَٰلِكَ يَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ

“He sends down water from the sky and the valleys flow according to their (respective) capacity. Then the floodwater carries the scum raised to the surface. And the items that are heated in the fire for making ornaments or other articles also have foam that comes up the same way. Thus Allah illustrates examples [parables] of the truth and falsehood. So, (whether produced by water or by fire,) the foam or scum passes away useless, but what is beneficial to the people endures in the earth. That is how Allah illustrates examples [parables].”¹⁴

In this parable Allah the Almighty describes the state and spirit of believer's heart. It explains that the revelation affects the hearts as the falling rain affects the valleys. The heart seeks guidance according to the respective spiritual capacity. A large spiritual heart will discern more guidance as the large valley gather more water and vice versa.

In the same way, fire removes the smut and dirt from the pure metal. The dirt and filth are burned by the fire. When it is burn only then pure metal is obtained. Similarly, impurity of the heart and carnal desires are removed from the heart of a believer, when the believer strives in the path of Allah to obey His commandments.

In the parables Allah the Almighty speaks in the language of a lay man. He speaks in the language of human being to guide them in a familiar way. All the parables are related to the lives of humans; there is not a single parable which is out of the context with human lives.¹⁵ Now we will find out that why Allah the Almighty speaks in the language of the parables.

Why does Allah the Almighty teach through the Parables?

Parables are found in all the Semitic Scriptures. An analysis will be presented that why Allah the Almighty adopts the parabolic method for the guidance of the mankind. This question will be discussed in the light of the science of Modern Epistemology. To answer the above-mentioned question, we will have to understand the phenomenon of brain working.

Confined Scope of the Five Sensations and Intellect of Human Beings

Five Sensations

Human beings observe and experience the reality of outside environment through the different senses. A sense is faculty by which the stimuli of outside world are perceived. All the neurologists describe this fact, that human beings use five senses to gather information about the world outside them. These five senses include the sense of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. These senses are also called exteroceptors. These exteroceptors detect stimulation from the outside of our body. The stimuli from each sensory organ in the body are relayed to different parts of the brain through various pathways. A structure of the brain called the thalamus receives most sensory signals.¹⁶

The human brain is dependent on these five senses to perceive any information from the outside world. The job of the brain starts when the five senses send their stimuli to brain. Brain proceeds information from the response of these stimuli. The working of the brain is dependent on the active working of the five senses. If the five senses are not working correctly and commutatively then the brain is unable to precede any information. In order to leads towards a fine conception, the brain needs categorical perception from the five senses.¹⁷

Meaning of the Intellect

In Arabic the word which is used for intellect is 'عقل' 'aql'. The literary meaning of the 'aql (intellect) refers to a restricted thing, which is limited in function and scope.

عَقْلٌ يَعْقِلُ وَيَعْقَلُهُ: أَمْسَكَهُ

“If something is bound to move and is strictly tight up with rope, it is called 'aql' (intellect).”¹⁸

عقل البعير

The word 'aql is also used for the camel who is tied with rope and he is not able to move.¹⁹

Imam Abū Maṣṣūr al-Aẓharī (d. 370 A.H)

Imam Abū Maṣṣūr al-Aẓharī narrates the quote of Abū Sa'īd regarding the meaning of intellect:

إِذَا أَقَامَهُ عَلَىٰ إِحْدَىٰ رِجْلَيْهِ

“If someone is forced to stand on one leg, then it is referred to ‘*aql* (intellect).”²⁰

Muḥy al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638 A.H.) and confined scope of the Intellect

The literal meaning of the ‘*aql* (intellect) reveals the fact that the scope of intellect is very limited as the scope of five senses is confined. The man is mortal so his all organs are limited. Shaykh Akbar Muḥy al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī while commenting on the scope of the intellect said that;

هَذَا مِنْ أَعْجَبِ الْأُمُورِ عِنْدَنَا أَنْ يَكُونَ الْإِنْسَانُ يُقَلِّدُ فِكْرَهُ وَنَظَرَهُ وَهُوَ مُحَدِّثٌ مِثْلَهُ

“It is a very strange point that human being assumes that his intellect is a superior and high-ranking entity and depends on his intellect, while intellect is also mortal like human being.”²¹

He further states that;

جَعَلَ الْعَقْلَ فَقِيرًا إِلَيْهِ يَسْتَمِدُّ مِنْهُ مَعْرِفَةَ الْأَصْوَاتِ. وَلَيْسَ فِي قُوَّةِ الْعَقْلِ مِنْ حَيْثُ دَاتِهِ إِدْرَاكُ شَيْءٍ مِنْ هَذَا مَا لَمْ يُوصِلْهُ إِلَيْهِ السَّمْعُ. وَكَذَلِكَ الْقُوَّةُ الْبَصَرِيَّةُ. جَعَلَ اللَّهُ الْعَقْلَ فَقِيرًا إِلَيْهَا

“Allah has made the intellect dependent on five senses of the body. Intellect is not capable of establishing a concept on his own. He is dependent on the ear and eyes to send the stimuli to brain for working. Allah has made the intellect dependent on it.”²²

Parable of the Five Senses

The necessity of co-ordination between the five senses and intellect can be understood in a better way with the help of a parable. Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri narrates a parable to illustrate the limited scope of the five senses and the intellect.

Once upon a time five blind people lived in a village. One day the people of the village bring an elephant in front of them and said that; touch the elephant and guess the shape of elephant. Every one of them touched the elephant according to their extent. During the phase of touching one of them has touched his leg, one of them has touched his ear, one touched his belly, and one touched his trunk. One of them said that the elephant is like wall,

one said he is like a pillar, one said he is like a fan; one said he is like a strong rope. Every one presumes and imagine according to his sense but they cannot lead to right concept as the five senses were not working properly.²³

So, it is proved that the appropriate working of all the five senses and their co-ordination with the brain is the fundamental prerequisite for the working of brain. Without that co-ordination, the brain is impotent for perceiving any concept. The functioning of the brain starts after receiving the information from the five senses. Without that information the intellect is totally null and void. That is why human beings are dependent on the knowledge of the Revelation for their guidance and enlightenment. Human intellect can never lead to a sound concept with his ability. It is beyond the capacity of brain to comprehend anything by itself. The parables are helpful and worthwhile for human beings as they are directed from their Lord. It is quite easy for human beings to understand the things that are visible and observable for them.

Psychological Aspect of the Parables

The psychological significance of the parables will be analyzed here. Allah the Almighty is the Creator of human beings. He is aware of the psychology of human beings. It will be testified with psychological references that teaching through parables is natural and easiest method of apprehension and cognition.

The Role of Vision in the formation of Concept

Vision plays fundamental and vital role in the formation of a conception. Vision needs to have the work of both the eyes and the brain to process any information. The majority of the stimuli which is done in the eyes are sent down to the brain by the way of nerve impulses. A photoreceptor is a specialized type of neuron found in the retina of eye that is eligible of photo transduction. The photoreceptor neurons of the retina send signals to other neurons by changing its membrane potential after absorbing photons. Ultimately, the information is processed by visual system to organize a complete representation of the visual world. The neuron signals reach the occipital cortex (visual cortex) and its radiations for the processing of brain. The occipital cortex along with other parts of the brain, interprets the signal as images, interpret the images to extract form, meaning, memory and context of the images.²⁴

So, our brain basically is an image processor and not a processor of the words. The part of our brain which is utilized to process words is quite small as comparison to the part that processes visual images. A course of countless researches has verified the power of visual imagery in contemplation. For example, it is hard to remember the wording of the books

and documents but one can easily remember the incidents of his life without any effort as he has experienced them.²⁵

That is why parabolic method of teaching is very effective as this method is based on visuals.

Dual-Coding Theory

Dual coding theory was developed by Allan Paivio in 1971 and in 1986 to explain an aspect of human cognition. This theory states that human understanding and recognition are escalated when nonverbal information is accompanied by verbal information. For instance, if you show someone an image of a boy marked with the word boy and the word boy is spoken loudly simultaneously, the person that is shown in the image will easily recognized and recall that image at a future point in time. The other part of the theory is that the comprehension and recall of information will be lessening if only one medium verbal or nonverbal is used.²⁶

Paivo believes that with the help of such an imagery code the level of understanding and apprehension of a person can be increased. It is easy for person to contemplate a thing which he has observed psychically. Same is the case in the study of the parables. That is why it is very natural to understand parables.

Active Learning Theory

It is also known as discovery learning. Active learning intensifies the self-sponsored curiosity and intrinsic motivation of the learner who ponders content and is actively involved in its formation. Basically, active learning shifts the focus of content from the instructor towards the learner.²⁷ Similarly, when the parables are stated in question form the focus is shifted to people and when they ponder upon it, they learn a lot. As they are being taught through familiar experiences linked with common people's life, so they can easily comprehend it.

Significance of Mental Image in Apprehension

Discovering the mental images is the most significant discovery of Psychology in the present century. Many scholars have affirmed that mental images have functional significance in behaviour and meaning and mediation processes in perception, verbal learning, memory, and language.²⁸ Mental imagery is the main motif of human conduct and behaviour. Mental image is a widespread method that is used in the whole world in different departments for various purposes. It plays a vital role in educating human and plays significant role in the formation of human personality. It could be considered as one of the consequential methods influencing human performance, actions, feelings and even abilities of people which are used along with human creation.²⁹

The concept that mental imaging leads to better understanding and can help healing illness is a very old belief. The first writing process that was invented in the human history was the visualization of the words in the Ancient Greek, Babylonians and Romans. The words were drawn in the shape of pictures as they were easy to understand.³⁰ Around 500 B.C., the poet Simonides summarized the importance of the imagery hypothesis of linguistic meaning in the phrase 'Words are the images of things.'³¹

Dr. Joseph Murphy

Dr. Joseph Murphy also elucidates this concept of mental image and role of visualization in the formation of concept. He also holds the point that the easiest and obvious way of learning or to formulate an idea is to visualize it. All our perceptions and ideas that enter in the life of human being depend upon the nature of mental images that we hold in our subconscious mind. He also mentions the famous phrase to support this point view. A picture is more worthy than thousand words.³²

Mental imaging used to be applied for numerous centuries as a medication. In Ancient India, Hindu saints believed that gods use images to send some messages and hence, they considered different imaging and illustrations in methods of Yuga practicing. Traditional Chinese physicians also have used mental images and imagination as main element to heal mind and body for many years.³³

It is established in the light of aforementioned evidences that teaching by using mental imaging and practical experiences in the form of parable is one of the most important methods for educating and upbringing of human beings. That is why; these methods are also used in the Qur'ān and the Bible in the form of Parables. The use of mental imagery method has made the parables an effective means of influencing hearts and minds. The parables pictured the concepts in abstract form by using the words and gives them soul. It is very natural to understand the parables because this conduct is intrinsic in the human brain.

Philosophical Aspect of the Parables

The same concept is also found in the subject of Philosophy. The apprehension of concepts is linked with the method that is used for guiding a person. The understanding will be enhanced, firstly, when it is through the channel of five senses. Secondly, the level of understanding is increased when a person gets through daily based experiences.

John Heil's Point of View

We have two types of the worlds; one is the outer material world. The second is the inner mental world, the mind and its contents. This second world, the mental world includes conscious experiences: the looks of seen objects, ways objects feel, heard sounds, tasted tastes, smelled smells. We

can perceive the outer world on the basis of these five senses. These qualities through which we observe the outer world are called 'primary qualities. The contemplation of the outer world depends on the primary qualities.³⁴

The Theory of Adverbialism

This is a theory of perception (primarily vision) which appeared in the mid of 1940. It holds the view that there are only alterations and modifications of our experiences which, to avoid the error of reification (positing sense-data), should be described with the help of adverbial modifiers, saying, for example, that one is practically appeared to green-squarely instead of saying that one sees a green square.³⁵

Lao-tse's viewpoint

In the fifth century B.C., the Chinese philosopher, Lao-tse, simply defined the essence of active learning when he said:

“If you tell me anything I will only listen. Similarly,
if you show me something, I will only visualize this.
But if you let me experience something, I will be able
to understand and learn.”³⁶

Socrates taught through the Parables

Teaching through parables was also the custom of Philosophers. The famous Philosopher Socrates also uses this method to teach difficult concepts to his students. For example, he describes the relation of man with his God by using a parable. He compares this relation as the relation of cattle with his owner. He says that you would become angry if your ox will not follow your instructions and leaves the right path. An owner will love the cattle that follow his instructions. Similar is the case for God.³⁷

Plato taught through the Parables

Plato also teaches his disciples by using parabolic method. For example, when Plato explains the concept of sound knowledge, he illustrates that the man is dependent of knowledge of revelation to seek sound knowledge and concepts. He admits that the knowledge of intellect of man can never be correct and he needs guidance. He explains this concept with the parable of bed made by a carpenter and says;

“Of this one bed, made by God, there can be knowledge, but in respect of the many beds made by carpenters there can be only opinion.”³⁸

It is established that the level of comprehension and cognition is increased with the help of the parables. Visuals and experience have a deeper effect and influence on the mind than abstractions. It is an undoubtedly agreed point, that the parables or metaphors used by the philosophers and experts of other fields are different from the parables of Divine Scriptures. It is accepted by the intellectuals of all fields that this method is the natural

method of cognition. That is why the intellectual people, philosophers also used this methodology to elucidate and clarify the concepts.

Epistemological Aspect of the Parables

We can find the same concept of perception and cognition in Epistemology. The level of understanding is dependent on the method of perception.

Robert Audi's Point of View

The visual believes and visions are an excellent source for discussing perception and perceptual believes. Perception is a basic source of the knowledge and verification. It is the main source of yielding believes and constituting knowledge. For example, if I look at the green field in front of me, I might believe not only that there is a green field there but also that I see one. I will visually perceive it, just as I tactually perceive the glass in my hand. The concept that is constituted through the channel of five senses would have a quite different status. Seeing believes.³⁹

Four Elements of the Perception

He also mentions the 4 elements of perception. The perception is based on;

- the perceiver,
- the object, that I can visualize;
- the sensory experience, my experience of shapes and colors;
- And the relation between the object and the subject.⁴⁰

The perception based on these elements leads to a sound conception.

Role of Culture in Cognition

Several authors have proposed correlations between the culture and learning styles. This is predicated on the concept that culture influences environmental perceptions which, in turn, to some degree determine the way in which information is processed and organized. The storage, processing, and assimilation methods for information contribute to how new knowledge is learned. Culture also plays a role in conditioning and reinforcing learning styles and partially explains why teaching methods used in certain parts of the world may be ineffective or less effective when blindly transplanted to another locale. (6, 24) Teachers should be aware of this phenomenon and the influence it has on the variety of learning styles that are present in classrooms. This is especially true in classrooms that have a large contingency of international students. Such classrooms are becoming increasingly common as more and more schools expand their internationalization efforts.⁴¹

Conclusion

It is quite evident in the light of the psychological, philosophical, epistemological and different references and evidences, that the parabolic method of teaching is the easiest way of contemplation for mankind. It is the natural way of learning because our brain is an image processor. Allah the Almighty has taught different creeds, commandments, traditions, and instructions through the parables for the ease/comfort of mankind. We should also adopt this method for teaching the children. It can be used in every field to teach different terminologies. As this is the easiest way of communication and learning.

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