

KUR'AN'A GÖRE İNSANIN TEMEL SORUMLULUĞU: DİNLEMEK VE SÖZÜN EN GÜZELİNE UYMAK

- The Primary Responsibility of Human Beings from the Qur'anic Perspective: Heeding
and Following the Best -

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Özet Bu makale, Kur'an-ı Kerim'e göre, insanın en temel sorumluluğunun ne olduğu sorusuna cevap verme amacıyla kaleme alınmıştır. Bu bağlamda insanın sorumluluğu teorik ve pratik olarak ikiye ayrılmış ve teorik sorumluluk dinlemek; pratik sorumluluk ise sözün en güzeline uymak şeklinde belirlenmiştir. Burada dinlemenin bir sesi duymanın ötesinde anlamlar taşıdığı ve aslında düşünmeyi de içeren kapsamlı bir kavram olduğu üzerinde durulmuş; daha sonra da sözün en güzeline uymanın anlam alanı tahlil edilmiştir. Sonuçta ise Kur'an'dan anlaşıldığına göre ancak düşünme ve eyleme birlikteliğiyle insanın sorumluluğunu yerine getirmiş olacağı ve böylece ebedî saadette ulaşma imkânını elde edeceği vurgulanmıştır.

Abstract This article aims to answer this question "what is the primary responsibility of human being from the Qur'anic perspective?" In this context, the responsibility of human being can be separated into two parts, theoretical and practical. Theoretical responsibility is listening, while practical one is following that which is the best. Thus, we can understand that listening or heeding is more than just hearing a voice; in fact listening is a comprehensive term that includes thinking as well. Moreover, the expression of 'following the best' will be analysed below. As a result, we can understand that thinking and acting together make it possible for people to fulfil their responsibilities and thus attain eternal happiness.

Key Words: Heeding and following the best.

1. Introduction

In the Qur'an, there are hundreds of verses that give certain responsibilities to human beings. It is possible to examine all these verses from different point of views; indeed, this is what Muslim scholars have done throughout history. It is even possible to make new classifications taking into consideration the conditions under which modern people have to live. However, this work does not aim to arrange commands and prohibitions one under the other, but rather to define the main principles, which are the basis for all commands and prohibitions, connected to such principles. In this context, this article can be assessed as a result of searching for

answers to questions like: “Is it possible to gather the entire chain of divine commands and prohibitions, which are important in different ways, under one directive?”, “What is the primary responsibility of the human being if the divine commands and prohibitions are ordered according to their values?”

Hence, the primary responsibility of the human being in the Qur’an is not being investigated here between secondary or sectional provisions, but rather between holistic and universal principles that act as the foundations for other provisions.

From the perspective of considering the revelation of the Qur’an as a whole, it is possible to say that primary and basic responsibility of human beings is listening and following the best way, in the sense of order in which something comes and in which it is valued. In fact, it might be said that we have no other responsibility but listening and following the best way, as these two have a comprehensive meaning that includes other rights and responsibilities.

2. Association of Theory with Practice: Listening and Following

It is clear that the responsibility of the human being according to the revelation cannot be restricted intellectually or within a merely practical sphere that lacks philosophical structures. The responsibility of the human being can be best fulfilled after completing theory and practice, as with every other discipline. The perfect form of human responsibility according to the revelation can be realized by listening and following the best way together. While the first point implies our theoretical responsibility, the second point implies our practical responsibility.

Naturally, theory comes before practice; for this reason, although we consider ‘listening and following together’, and this is true as it indicates perfection in responsibility, in fact, listening (*sem’* in Arabic) is a primary responsibility for human beings, the object of the revelation. In this case, faith, which is the most important and basic thing in religion, comes after listening; clearly the possibility of having faith lies in the realization of the concept of listening. Without a doubt, a person should understand what they believe in before they believe. In fact, knowledge that is dependent on reports occurs via listening. In other words, the invitation to the faith can be understood by listening. It is impossible to go on to the next stage without listening. Accepting submission (*taklif*) and obeying, is only possible after listening.¹

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s (d. 606/1209) offers explanations such as: “it is impossible for pure transmission proofs to exist, since somebody’s report would be

¹ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafātīhu al-ghayb*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya 2000, XV, 116.

meaningless if it is not known to be the truth.”² This is closely related to this subject. That is to say, from the point of epistemology, listening, which includes contemplation, is the basis of transmission.³ The human being can decide by listening, and this includes thinking as well, whether a word belongs to people or God.

Therefore, Mu‘tazila scholars think that in the hierarchy of evidence it is necessary to give the first rank to the intellect.⁴ As Qadi Abduljabbar (d.415/1024) mentioned, revelations do not bear witness to divine unity and justice that are in the sphere of intellect, since the truth of divine words depends on intellect; transmission consists of reports, but a report can be true or false. The trueness of a report is manifested after the truthfulness of the reporter has been established; in the case in point, the reporter is one who never tells lies. At the same time, the existence of the revelation and its meaning can be understood by reason alone. Hence, it would be impossible for human being to enter the way of the revelation without listening to, i.e. thinking about, the revelation.

The necessity of listening to the revelation is very obvious and well documented; while listening is mentioned as a believer’s attribute,⁵ disbelievers are described as not listening in the Holy Qur’an.⁶ The order to listen is in fact cited in only one verse. “So, when the Qur’an is recited, listen to it, and be silent that you may receive mercy.”⁷ At this point, I would like to remind the reader which category of people this verse is addressed to, as this is a matter of debate amongst Muslim scholars. Some say the audience is disbelievers, while others say it is believers.⁸

² Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Muhassal afkār al-mutaqaddīm wa-l-muta‘akhhirīn min al-‘ulamā’ wa-l-hukamā’ wal-mutakallimīn* (ed. H Atay), Cairo: Maktaba Dār al-Turās 1991, p. 141.

³ For the priority of reason in front of the revelation, see: Nicholas Heer, “The Priority of Reason in the Interpretation of Scripture: Ibn Taymiyyah and The Mutakallimūn”, *Literary Heritage of Classical Islam Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of James A. Bellamy* (Ed. Mustansir Mīr), Princeton: The Darwin Press 1993, pp. 181-195; Hulya Alper, “İmam Māturīdī’de Akıl-Vahiy İlişkisi: Aklin Önceliği ve Vahyin Gerekliliği” *Milel ve Nihal: İnci, Kültür ve Mitoloji Arařtırmaları Dergisi*, VII/2 (2010), pp. 7-29.

⁴ The order of evidence in Mu‘tazila are the intellect, the Book, the Sunnah and icma‘ (consensus) (see: Kıvāmuddīn Mānkūm, *Ta‘līk ‘alā Sharh al-Usūl al-hamse*, (ed. Abdülkerīm Usman) Cairo: Maktabatu Vahba 1996, p. 88).

⁵ az-Zumar 39/18.

⁶ al-Fussilat 41/4.

⁷ al-A‘rāf 7/204.

⁸ For different interpretations, see: al-Māturīdī, *Ta‘wīlāt al-Qur‘ān* (scientific control: Bekir Topaloglu), İstanbul: Mizan 2006, VI, 152 et seq.; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Ma‘ārif al-ghayb*, XV, 83 et seq.

Actually as Māturīdī (d. 333/944), the founder of one of the Sunni schools of thoughts, implies, listening is necessary from the view of reason, even if we do not have any other evidence.⁹ Of course God is more worthy of being listened to than anyone else.

At this point, the meaning of listening should be explained. In fact, listening is not merely hearing, although it contains this meaning. Listening has a richer meaning, which includes appreciation and consideration. When we contemplate the Holy Qur'an, we can find many examples that demonstrate these meanings.

As al-Raghib al-Isfahānī (d. 502/1108) explained¹⁰ that in the Holy Qur'an the word *sem* ' is used in different ways; sometimes *sem* ' is mentioned, but it refers to the ear. For example, as we can see in the verse: "Allah has set a seal on their hearts and on their hearing,"¹¹ sometimes *sem* ' refers to hearing. Again, "Verily, they have been removed far from hearing it."¹² However, sometimes ' *sem* is used to refer to obedience and comprehension. For example if I say "listen to what I say", I want you to do what I say. An example of this type of listening can be found in sūrah an-Nisā: "We listen to your word and disobey"¹³

As we can understand, listening has more meanings than just hearing a noise or sound. In fact, all of the verses that are concerned with listening are intended for contemplation.¹⁴

This demonstrates that listening is a primary responsibility for both believers and unbelievers. I want to emphasise once more the responsibility of listening after hearing the words and understanding them, the duty of reconsidering and arriving at a judgment. As a matter of fact, human beings are different from other animals in this context. Animals hear, but they cannot think. They cannot put forward an idea. For this reason, listening is not only the action of hearing; it is an action of the intellect as well. Thus, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) says that listening is not the same as hearing, but rather, listening is listening with reason, or reasoning about and understanding the truth. He also clearly explains that listening means knowing,

⁹ Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, VI, 152.

¹⁰ al-Raghib al-Isfahānī, *Müfredātu elfāz al-Qur'ān* (ed. Safvān Adnān Dāvūdī), Damascus: ad-Dār al-Shamiyya 1992, article of "sem"; Abu al-Bakā, *Kulliyāt Ebi al-Bekā* (ed. D. Adnān Dervish), Beirut: Muassasat ar-Risāle 1993, p. 496.

¹¹ al-Bakara 2/7.

¹² Ash-Shu'arā 26/212.

¹³ an-Nisā 4/46.

¹⁴ al-Raghib al-Isfahānī *Müfredātu elfāz al-Qur'ān*, article of "sem"; Abu al-Bakā, *Kulliyāt Ebi al-Bekā*, p. 496.

accepting and thinking.¹⁵ In fact, the transformation of hearing a sound into listening is only possible with the function of the intellect. Thus, a person whose rational function are not sound would be unable to listen.

Therefore, contemplating and understanding is an indispensable requirement of listening. Moreover, it is impossible to talk about listening without contemplation. The consensus of all Muslim scholars about the obligation of speculative thinking (*nazar*) for knowing God¹⁶ (*mārifetullah*) is related to this matter. From this point, it can be alleged that the primary responsibility of the human being is ‘thinking’, not listening; there is no contradiction here with accepting listening as the first rank of theoretical reasonability, since, as mentioned before, listening requires thinking. On the other hand, pure thinking is not enough to fulfil the responsibility of the human being before God; it is just a precondition. At this point, I must indicate that some scholars state that the first obligation of the human being is not thinking, but rather having the inclination to think.¹⁷ Probably, with such an approach, some scholars, such as Imam al-Ash‘arī (d. 324/935), suggest that the realization of knowledge of God cannot be correct without speculative thinking or deductive reasoning (*nazar* and *istidlāl*).¹⁸

In addition, Muslim theologians do not think it is not sufficient to just think; although they discuss whether the first obligation of the human being is knowing God or speculative thinking,¹⁹ they state that knowing God falls under the responsibility of human being. Moreover, Jurjānī (d.816/1413) clearly signifies that there is a consensus in the entire Muslim community that knowing God is obligatory.²⁰

All of these explanations indicate the reason why the Holy Qur’an frequently invites people to think, using different kinds of verbs, such as understanding,

¹⁵ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, VII, 119.

¹⁶ Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī, *Abkāru al-afkār, fī usūl al-dīn* (ed. Ahmad Muhammad al-Mahdī), Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa al-Vasāik al-Qawmiyya 2002, I, 155.

¹⁷ For example, Imām al-Haramayn al-Juwaynī mentions like that: ‘The first duty of sound intellect, upon attaining the age of puberty or of legal sexual maturity, is to aspire after a correct reasoning (*al-kasdu ila an-nazar*)...’ Imām al-Haramayn al-Juwaynī, *A Guide to Conclusive Proofs for the Principles of Belief Kitāb al-irshād ilā qawāti ‘al-adilla fī usūl al-i‘tiqād* (trans. Paul E. Walker) Lebanon: Garnet n.d., p. 3.

¹⁸ Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad maqālāt al-Shaykh Abī al-Hasan al-Ash‘arī*, (ed. Daniel Gimaret), Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq 1986, p. 250.

¹⁹ For various ideas, see: al-Āmidī, *Abkāru al-afkār* I, 170 et seq.

²⁰ Sayyid Sharīf Jurjānī, *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya 1998,I, 257 et seq.

considering, remembering, etc.²¹ For example, in the same surah there is the command, uttered more than once: “And we have indeed made the Qur’an easy to understand and remember, then is there any that will remember (or receive admonition)?”²²

Then, the use of a stern Qur’anic language which affects the listeners, particularly at the beginning of the revelation, which brings to our attention oppression in the society, asks questions that lead us to question ourselves and our future, could possibly be connected to the desire to make people think and to destroy social and psychological obstacles which prevent the intellect from functioning.²³ When people start to think, they become ready to listen as well; those who do not think are not able to listen. A certain level of maturity is required to be able to listen.

As I have indicated before, listening is peculiar to human beings and it is only possible to move towards the process of perfection via listening. Moreover, as has been mentioned elsewhere, the Holy Qur’an mentions listening as an attribute of Allah that comes before seeing. (*sami* and *basir*) This establishes that listening is prior to and more important than seeing. I would like to remind the reader in this context about the importance of listening with the words of the famous Sufi, Jalaluddin al-Rumi (d. 672/1273). He starts the *Masnawi*, his great masterpiece, with the word ‘listen’. We might say listening is the door of knowledge. The commentator Avni Konuk interprets this as follows: “This indicates that knowledge and wisdom, which are the perfection of the human being, derive from the ear.”²⁴ As a result it is impossible to understand without listening, to accept without understanding, e.g. without these there can be no faith.

Here we can ask what the meaning of listening is for people who are not aware of the Holy Qur’an or the divine message in general. In fact, if we consider that the object of listening is only related to a verbal revelation then we have a right to ask these kinds of questions. And, if we consider the object of listening in a broad sense, we can find the answer. Obviously, listening should not be contemplated only to a verbal revelation; it is related to existence as much as it is related to verbal revelation. That is, listening not only includes listening to the words, but also listening to the nature of the message as well. It might be for this purpose, that at the beginning of the history of Islamic thought the physics book of Aristotle (384 BC –

²¹ For example, Kāf 80/37.

²² al-Kāmer 54/17, 22, 32, 40.

²³ For details see: Izzet Derveze, *Siretu’l Rasul Kur’an’a Göre Hz. Muhammed’in Hayati (Mekke Dönemi)* (trans. Mehmet Yolcu), Istanbul: Yonelis 1995, II, 155 et seq.

²⁴ A. Avni Konuk, *Mesnevî-i Sherîf Sherhi* (ed. Mustafa Tahralı et al.), Istanbul: Kitabevi 2004, p. 73.

322 BC) were translated to Arabic under the title *Simāü't-tabī* (listening to nature). Thus *sem'*, i.e. listening, means to listen to verbal messages as well as listening to the creations created by the One Who sent the message. As a matter of fact, the contemporary German philosopher Heidegger (1889-1976) talks about the forgetfulness of existence, and suggests listening to the voice of dasein as a philosophical project, instead of being dominant over the dasein as is done in modern science and philosophy.

In fact, the responsibility of human beings is to listen, whether they hear the verbal revelation or not. Here one should remember that is known, the signs (*ayāt*) of the Holy Qur'an do not consist only of verses from the Divine Book, but also those in nature as well.²⁵ First of all, there are innumerable signs, such as the sky, the earth, the heaven and the earth,²⁶ the existence of the stars,²⁷ the night and the day²⁸ and the revival of dead land,²⁹ all as mentioned in the Holy Qur'an. Moreover the existence of the human being itself is a sign of existence of God. That is, people are asked to listen to signs within themselves and outside themselves;³⁰ all of the signs are for people who listen to the Holy Qur'an.³¹ As an example, the following verse can be mentioned: “*And Allah sends down water (rain) from the sky, then He revives the earth therewith after its death. Verily, in this is a sign (clear proof) for people who listen.*”³² In addition, the Qur'an insists that believers merely listen to divine invitations, saying that “*And you (O Muhammad) cannot guide the blind from their straying; you can make to hear only those who believe in Our Ayāt (signs) and have submitted to Allah in Islam (as Muslim).*”³³

For this reason, the Holy Qur'an describes infidels who do not want to listen as metaphorically deaf, dumb, and blind.³⁴ Once again, the infidels are compared to a dead people and the Qur'an warns the Prophet, saying “*So verily, you cannot make the dead to hear.*”³⁵

²⁵ Āl-i 'Imrān 3/190; Yūsuf 12/105.

²⁶ Yūnus 10/6.

²⁷ Al-An'ām 6/97.

²⁸ al-Isrā 17/12

²⁹ Yāsīn 36/33.

³⁰ “We will show them Our signs in the universe, and in their own selves, until it becomes manifest to them that this (the Qur'an) is the truth.” al-Fussilat 41/53.

³¹ Yūnus 10/67; ar-Rūm 30/23.

³² an-Nahl 16/65.

³³ ar-Rūm 30/53.

³⁴ al-Bakara 2 /171.

³⁵ ar-Rūm 30/52.

Of course, people have the ability to speak and hear, but this does not mean that they can listen. Moreover, the Qur'an states, "but the deaf will not hear the call."³⁶ Māturīdī explains that when one does not take advantage of their hearing ability then they are referred to in the same way as those who do not have this ability

When the Prophet recited the Holy Qur'an in front of the People of Mecca some of the polytheists who were of that character tried to prevent him from reciting and said: "Do not listen to this Qur'an, and make noise in the midst of its (recitation) so that you may overcome it."³⁷ In fact, they wanted to eliminate the possibility of any social changes that could destroy their rule; such change is only possible after listening. In a sense, listening means to create the possibility to enter the right path; as the Qur'an declares, believers who accept the invitation are people who listen.³⁸

As a matter of fact, the existence of listening, which I call a theoretic responsibility, although enabling one to embark on the right path, does not make it compulsory. Thus, the Qur'an mentions this reality. "Who listens to the verses of Allah (being) recited to him, yet persists with pride as if he heard them not?"³⁹ And "They used to change it knowingly after they understood it."⁴⁰ It is also said: "Turn not away from him while you are listening."⁴¹

As we can see, obedience or disobedience can only occur after listening. In the Holy Qur'an both attitudes are mentioned: "We hear, and we obey."⁴² "We have heard and disobeyed."⁴³ These two examples from the revelation indicate two opposite attitudes that exist in reality.

Thus, as I mentioned at the beginning, theoretical responsibility must support practical responsibility, which is following the best in order to attain righteousness. Namely, human beings are responsible for following the most sublime in beauty, goodness and righteousness. While people are fulfilling these responsibilities, it is clearly not enough to consider only their rights, it is also necessary to consider the ideas of others and evaluate these alternatives.

Obviously, the revelation does not approve of blind adherence or of ignoring the words of others. On the contrary, Islam demands deliberately reaching acknowledgement (*tasdik*). Moreover, the true place of one idea among others can

³⁶ al-Anbiyā 21/45.

³⁷ al-Fussilat 41/26.

³⁸ al-An'ām 6/36.

³⁹ al-Jāsiya 45/8; Luqmān 31/7.

⁴⁰ al-Bakara 2/75.

⁴¹ al-Anfāl 8/20.

⁴² al-Bakara 2/285; al-Māide 5/7.

⁴³ al-Bakara 2/93; an-Nisā 4/46.

only be understood when people select it from among different options. If other options are disregarded or neglected at the beginning, this means that the option has been automatically accepted. For this reason, Islam rejects such an approach as well as any orders that we do not use our intellect.

This means that people have the freedom to listen. Thus, the Holy Qur'an stresses the freedom of listening, ordering the protection of polytheists who were seeking refuge; the Holy Qur'an adds "so that he may hear the Word of Allah (the Holy Qur'an), and then escort him to where he can be secure"⁴⁴ Therefore people's listening should not be limited in any way; this is particularly true for those who are not yet believers, but who are at the stage of listening. When we think globally, nobody is responsible for believing in a religion that is common in their society; rather they are responsible for accepting the best ideas wherever they live.

In fact, this responsibility indicates the Muslim attitude towards the global intellectual accumulation. It can be said that a Muslim thinker should show people how Islam is positioned between other religions and thoughts, and should evaluate and reconsider the entire accumulation. In these circumstances, people are able to follow the Qur'an with a rational choice, not imitation or bigotry.

For this reason, saying "I believe despite the refusal of my intellect" is not a stance that is in keeping with the Qur'anic weltanschauung or that is present in Islamic thought, which is dependent, to a large extent, on the Qur'an.⁴⁵ Moreover, Muslim theologians have debated the rational foundation of their beliefs, so a Muslim thinker can not say: "there is no role for the intellect to play in faith" as we see in Western theology, nor deny knowledge only in order to find a place for belief.⁴⁶ Muslims believe not because they are desperate, but because they think their beliefs are true. Therefore, Muslim scholars do not approve of blind belief.⁴⁷ Most Muslim scholars insist on the invalidity of blind belief; some propose that blind belief is not acceptable, or that the blind believers are disobeying, due to their abandonment of rational thought.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ at-Tavba 9/6.

⁴⁵ Mehmet Aydin, "Allah'in Varlığina İnanmanın Akıllığı", *İslâmî Arařtırmalar*, I/2 (Ankara 1986), p. 18-19.

⁴⁶ Hulya Alper, *İmam Mâtürîdî'de Akıl-Vahiy İlişkisi*, İstanbul: İz 2009, p. 169.

⁴⁷ For the different views of Muslim scholars look at: Abdulkâhir al-Baghdâdî, *Usûl al-dîn* (ed. Ahmad Shams al-Dîn), Beirut: Dâr al-Kutub al-'İlmiyya 2002, p. 280 et seq.; Nasafî, *Tabsira al-adilla* (ed. Claude Salamé), Damascus: Institut Français de Damas 1990-93, I, 28 et seq.

⁴⁸ For details see: Hulya Alper, *Bir Kelam Problemi Olarak İmanın Psikolojik Yapısı*, İstanbul: Ragbet 2007 p. 186 et seq.

In addition, as is known, the Qur'an does not approve of blind following and criticizes people who did not heed the Prophets, preferring to follow the way of their ancestors. In various verses it is declared that the polytheists of Mecca refused the Prophet's invitation, saying: "Nay! We shall follow what we found our fathers following." And their negative attitudes are condemned in verses like: "Even though their fathers did not understand anything nor were they guided?"⁴⁹ Furthermore the Qur'an challenges all others by saying that "Allah has sent down the best statement"⁵⁰ and also commands believers to invite others to the way of their Lord by 'persuasive preaching',⁵¹ or to 'speak to them an effective word'.⁵²

In this context, it is clear why believers must obey the best word not with blind belief, but with agreement and obedience; these can only occur with a conscious choice.⁵³ An action that follows listening, i.e. understanding, may help a person to attain salvation. It is well-known that the Qur'an describes believers as: "Those who listen to the Word and follow the best"⁵⁴

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, when a believer performs listening and action together it is possible that they will be rewarded with Divine acceptance. Thus these two actions have a comprehensive sphere of meaning which covers all the other divine commands and prohibitions. Additionally, thinking and contemplation are always functional in listening and following the best, and thus, listening and following the best reflect a conscious choice.

As a result, the Holy Qur'an promises rewards to those believers who say: 'We hear and we obey.' The only words that a faithful believer will utter when called before Allah to be judged is: "We hear and we obey."⁵⁵ When theoretical perfection and practical perfection come together, human beings have a chance to achieve Divine love and eternal happiness.

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⁴⁹ See : al-Bakara 2/ 170; al-Māide 5/104.

⁵⁰ az-Zumar 39/23.

⁵¹ an-Nahl 16/125; al-Isrā 17/53; al-'Ankebût 29/46.

⁵² an-Nisā 4/63.

⁵³ Omer Mahir Alper, "itaat" *TDV. Islam Ansiklopedisi*, Istanbul 2001, XXIII, 444-445.

⁵⁴ az-Zumar 39/18.

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