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A Study on the Qur'anic Way of Coding Parables

Syed Shahid Rasool Kakakhel*

Abstract

The study reveals the Qur'anic Way of coding parables. The parables appear in folklore and in Biblical, Buddhist, Greek and European religious and cultural tradition as well as in Hebrew and Arabic languages. The data was collected from the text of the Holy Qur'an and other relevant literature and was put into logical sequence in accordance with the perspective of teaching and learning process. The Qur'anic parables in the relevant areas were identified and analyzed with reference to their educational significance. The data shows that the Qur'anic parable is best understood in relation to the context in which it appears. It offers analysis of the themes implicit in the parables. Each parable implicit a different narrative Style appropriate to the theme. The narration of parables may range from the barest minimum setting to a full-fledged story with a beginning, middle, and ending at the climax of the story. Almighty Allah does not hesitate to use imagery drawn from the world of the humblest creatures, like a housefly, to the mighty forces of nature, which act as the ministers of Instruments of His will. There is profound meaning in each parable, which is embodied in rich and highly suggestive symbols and Meta force. Parables are intended to facilitate understanding of the teaching of Holy Qur'an. It is, therefore, recommended that the method of coding Parables and examples should be included in the curriculum at appropriate level; teachers be educated to use the Qur'anic techniques of coding parables. It is also recommended that more studies be carried out on this important aspect of the Holy Qur'an.

Keywords: Quran, Parables, Islam

Introduction

The Holy Qur'an claims to be the Book of Hidayah, i.e. guidance for man. It is the book available to all mankind and addresses the man kind. Its message is valid for all times to come and will never become outdated. Its instructions are aimed at general welfare of mankind and are based on the limits within its reach. Its wisdom is conclusive in all its

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dimensions. It does not condemn the flesh, nor does it neglect the soul. It does not humanize Allah nor does it defy or deny man. Everything is carefully placed where it is required in the total scheme of logical creation. The Holy Qur'an uses a variety of literary forms to convey its message. These literary forms bring the message in a style, which is full of life and free of unnecessary monotony. Generally the experts agree that there are four types of basic literary forms used in The Holy Qur'an: parable, oath, debate and Narrative. The parable is called 'mathal' in Arabic. In Arabic it is also commonly translated as simile or metaphors. A parable is a narrative of imagined events used to illustrate or convey moral or spiritual message.

Statement of the problem

The study was designed to find out the Qur'anic way of coding parables with the view to offering recommendations for its use in the process of teaching and learning.

Objectives of the study

Following were the objectives of the study:-

- (i) To explore Qur'anic way of coding parables in the light of the text of the Holy Qur'an.
- (ii) To highlight the significant areas where the Qur'an uses parables.

Methodology

It was basically documentary research. The data was collected from the text of the Holy Qur'an and other relevant literature, which was put into logical sequence in accordance with different perspectives of teaching and learning process. The Qur'anic parables in the relevant areas were identified and analyzed with reference to their educational significance. The parables pertaining to the major areas have been collected and analyzed in the context of teaching and learning process.

Concept of parable

A parable is a story in prose or verse that is told to illustrate a religious or ethical idea. A parable differs from a fable (the two terms are not interchangeable). The word parable comes from the Greek, which was the name given by Greek rhetoricians for effective illustrations in the form of a brief narrative. Later on it came to mean a factitious narrative or allegory, generally referring to something that might naturally occur, through which information regarding spiritual and moral matters are conveyed. The prototypical parable differs from the apologue in that it is

an inherently probable and realistic story, taking place in some familiar setting of life. George Flyer Townsend defined parable as “the designed use of language purposely intended to convey a hidden and secret meaning other than that apparently contained in the words themselves, and which may or may not bear a special reference to the bearer and reader.”¹

Functions of parables

Generally, the function of the parables is analogous to the function of the Qur'an itself. Like the Qur'an, the parables defend the truthfulness of Muhammad (PBUH), the Messenger of Allah, against the false parables of the non-believers. The parables help in inculcating the true concept of Allah in the minds of the believers; make moral and spiritual principles understandable to common man; they separate truth from falsehood; reveal divine truth and make it more meaningful to the reader.

Parables are an invitation to mankind to reflect. “If we had sent down this Quran upon a mountain, thou wouldst have seen it humbled, split asunder out of the fear of God. And those similitudes – We strike them for men; haply they will reflect.”²

Believers seek guidance from parables, whereas it has opposite effect on the minds of disbelievers; they become astray. Allah gently tries to woo man's will away from evil and disbelief and brings him towards belief and worship. “The similitude of the two parties is as the blind and the deaf and the seer and the hearer. Are they equal in similitude? Will ye not then take heed.”³ In fashioning his parables man “forgets his own creation. He says: ‘who will give life to these bones when they have rotted away and become dust?’”⁴ Here we have a veritable lesson in humility. Man forgets that Allah has created him from *nutfah* (sperm drops); he stands forth “as an open opponent”⁵ To Allah man fails to realize that he is an insignificant speck of a creature, a drop in the unbounded oceans of creation, yet he has the temerity to dispute with his creator and make idle comparisons.

Like the Qur'an, the parable is often intended to foster the spirit of reverence and worship for Allah.⁶ The parable is meant to show Allah's infinite knowledge. The purpose of a parable may be to highlight the goodly tree, whose root is firmly fixed, and its branches (reach) to the sky.”⁷ A parable may reinforce powers of memory to hold and preserve wisdom, beauty of goodness and ugliness of evil.⁸ The function of the parable as the instruments for the instruction of mankind is precisely the function of the Qur'an as a whole: “And Allah sets forth parables for mankind and Allah is All-knower of everything.”⁹ Different kinds of parables are designed to promote the cause of peace and universal

harmony: "And indeed we have put forward every kind of example (parable) in this Qur'an for mankind. But man is ever more Quarrelsome than anything."¹⁰

Parables may be coined for every conceivable subject but it is forbidden for Allah Almighty. "So put not forward similitudes for Allah (as there is nothing similar to Him, nor does he resemble anything. Truly, Allah knows and you know not."¹¹

The parables make abstract concepts and spiritual realities comprehensible for ordinary individual. The truth of divine unity and the relationship of man to the Creator is set forth in the following parable: "Allah coineth a similitude: a man in relation to whom are several partners, quarreling, and a man belonging wholly to one man. Are the two equal in similitude? Praise is to Allah! But most of them know not."¹²

Parables may provide insight into the life of the world, the phenomenon of the human mind, and the aberrations of the human spirit. The parables, which offer arguments in support of a truth on the basis of logical demonstration and appear to reason, recall similar parables in the Old Testament; they are sometimes characterized as demonstrative parables.¹³ There are, for example, people who attribute fatherhood of certain females of Allah but when they are informed of the birth of a female to their wives their faces "become dark, gloomy, and filled with grief."¹⁴ Parables like these expose the absence of vision, lack of imagination and shoddy logic of the authors of parables that are no more than false imputations. They put their tastes and preferences at a much higher level of privileged excellence than the Creator Himself.

Qur'anic parables may be aimed at the unbelievers in order to convince them of the truth of the Qur'an and the truth of Muhammad (PBUH), the messenger of Allah: "and indeed we have set forth for mankind in this Qur'an every kind of parable. But if you, O Muhammad, bring to them a sign or proof, as an evidence for the truth of your Prophethood the disbelievers are sure to say (to the believers): 'you follow nothing but falsehood and magic.'¹⁵ The parables that these people fabricate are an example of their limited knowledge and lack of understanding: "And he (man) puts forth for us a parable, and forgets his own creation. He says, who will give life to these bones when they have rotted away and become dust?"¹⁶

One of the functions of the Qur'anic parables is to defend prophet Muhammad (PBUH) against reproachful appellations, slanders and calumny. They speak of the prophet as a poet, madman, and a bewitched person: "See what similitudes they coin for thee, and thus are all astray and they cannot find a right road."¹⁷ See how they coin

similitudes for you, so they have gone astray and they cannot find a right path".¹⁸

Qur'anic Way of Coding Parables

There are two cognate words in the Qur'an i.e. *mathal* and *mithal*, which appear with a significant frequency. The word *mathal* is similar to the Hebrew word *mashal*. Both are considered similar to English word 'parable'. However, they have a number of other meanings beside parable.

The core concept governing the Hebrew *mashal* and Arabic *mathal* is likeness or similitude. Arabic-English dictionaries of the Qur'an give different meaning for *mathal* and *mithal*. The latter is translated as similitude, likeness, like, similar, equal, as much as, the same as. The former is translated as like, a likeness, equivalent, similitude, comparison, parable, and figure of speech. In modern Arabic-English dictionaries *mathal* denotes likeness, metaphor, simile, parable, proverb, adage, example, lesson, similar case, comparable to, ideal, and model. The reader would recall that the Hebrew *mashal*, as discussed earlier, has a similarly wide range of meaning. The word *mathal* as used in the Qur'an commands a similarly wide range of meaning. Let us look at some examples of the use of the word *mathal* in the Qur'an:

- Thus Allah coineth the similitudes.¹⁹
- Each of them we warned by examples and each of them we brought to utter ruin.²⁰
- Communities like you.²¹
- We are not to be frustrated from changing your *forms* and creating you again.²²
- Ten times the like thereof.²³
- Allah destroyed them completely and a *similar* fate awaits the disbelievers.²⁴
- Thus does Allah set forth for mankind their similitudes.²⁵

If we treat Arabic *mathal* as the equivalent of the Hebrew *mashal* and consider all instances in the Qur'anic text of *mathal*, just as the Old Testament treats all instances of *mashal*, as parables, we will have to include many of the allegories of the Qur'an and other kinds of mystic narratives like the story of *Khidar* in counting the number of parables in the Qur'an. According to the index at the end of *the Glorious Qur'an* there are thirty-nine parables. There are a dozen other narratives or 'episodes', which qualify more appropriately as fables and allegories but are considered as parables by some English translators of the Qur'an. Since majority of the translators of the Qur'an including A. Yusuf Ali

and the authors of translations of the Qur'an like the *Noble Qur'an*, *Tafsir-ul-Qur'an* (Majidi)²⁶ reach a consensus on approximately thirty-nine parables only.

The parables included in this study satisfy the following basic and common requirements of parable:-

- It is a narrative that is drawn from the actions and observations of everyday human life. It has human beings as characters whereas a fable has animals, plants or inanimate objects as characters.
- The second requirement is that the parable has a literal level as well as a moral or spiritual level of meaning.
- The third characteristic is that it illustrates a moral attitude or a religious Principle. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* defines a parable as "a story, which either true or possessing all the appearance of truth, exhibits in the sphere of natural human life a process parallel to one which exists in the ideal and spiritual world."²⁷

The word *mathal*, meaning parable occurs thirty-nine times in the Qur'an. It occurs another sixty-seven times with certain modifying pronouns suffix like *lun*, *hu*, *hum*, *kum* etc.

The Parables Themselves

The topic-wise description of some of the Qur'anic parables are given as under:-

Man who kindled a Fire

Their likeness is as the likeness of one who kindled a fire; then, when it lighted all around him, Allah took away their light and left them in darkness. (So) they could not see.²⁸

Goat-Herd

And the example of those who disbelieve is as that of him who shouts to those (flock of sheep) that hears nothing but calls and cries. (They are) deaf, dumb and blind. So they do not understand.²⁹

Grain of Corn

The likeness of those who spend their wealth in the way of Allah is as the likeness of a grain (of corn); it grows seven ears, and each ear has a hundred grains. Allah gives manifold increase to whom He wills, And Allah is All-Sufficient for His creatures' need, All-Knower.³⁰

Hard, Barren Rock

You who believe! Do not render in vain your Sadaqah (charity) by reminders of your generosity or by injury, like him who spend his wealth to be seen of men, and he does not believe in Allah, nor in the Last Day. His likeness is the likeness of a smooth rock on which is a little dust; on it falls heavy rain, which leave it bare. They are not able to do anything with what they have earned. And Allah does not guide the disbelieving people.³¹

Ashes blown about by Wind

The parable of those who disbelieved in their Lord is that their works are as ashes, on which the wind blows furiously on a stormy day; they shall not be able to get aught of what they have earned. That is the straying, far away (from the Right Path).³²

A Fly

Mankind! A similitude has been coined, so listen to it (carefully): Verily, those on whom you call besides Allah, cannot create (even) a fly, even though they combine together for the purpose. And if the fly snatches away a thing from them, they will have not power to release it from the fly. So weak are (both) the seeker and the sought.³³

Mirage in a Desert

As for those who disbelieved, their deeds are like a mirage in a desert. The thirsty one thinks it to be water until he comes up to it, he finds it to be nothing; but he finds Allah with him, who will pay him his due (Hell). And Allah is Swift in taking account.³⁴

Spider

The likeness of those who take (false deities as) Auliya (Protectors, helpers) other than Allah is the likeness of a spider who builds (for itself) a house; but verily, the frailest (weakest) of house is the spider's house-if they but knew.³⁵

Findings/Conclusions

The following conclusions and recommendations are drawn from the study:-

- The parables of the Qur'an demonstrate a great variety of artistic techniques that Allah has employed in creating each of them
- This study reflected that the literary device of the parable is universal and it occurs in many cultural traditions.

- Qur'anic parable is best understood in relation to the context it appears in.
- There is profound meaning in each parable, which is embodied in rich and highly suggestive symbols and metaphors. Some parables create subtle, dramatic effects and powerful artistic values of contrast in material objects and conceptual formulations.
- Many of the teachings of the holy Qur'an are encapsulated in the parables. Parables are intended to facilitate the understanding of the profound teachings of Holy Qur'an.
- Each parable employs a different narrative technique that is appropriate in relation to the theme of the parable. The narrative content of the parable may range from the barest minimum setting to a full-fledged story.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered based on the findings and conclusions:-

- The divine method of coding parables and examples should be included in the curriculum at appropriate level.
- Teachers at all levels be encouraged to adopt the Qur'anic techniques of coding parables and illustration, which is simple, precise, understandable and drawn out of common things and day to day life.
- Parables are generally the neglected area of Qur'anic knowledge and teachings. It is very rarely touched upon by scholars. There is a dire need to carry out more studies on this important aspect of the Holy Qur'an.

Notes

¹ George Fyler Townsend, *Translator's preface to Aesop's Fables*, Belford, Clarke & Co., 1887.

² Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali, Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *Noble Quran English Translation*, verse 59:21

³ Ibid., verse 11:24

⁴ Ibid., verse 36:78

⁵ Ibid., verse 36:77

⁶ Ibid., verse 39:29

⁷ Ibid., verse 14:24

⁸ Ibid., verse 14:25

⁹ Ibid., verse 24:35

¹⁰ Ibid., verse 18:54

¹¹ Ibid., verse 16:74

¹² Ibid., verse 39:29

¹³ Ibid., verse 37:77

¹⁴ Ibid., verse 43:17

¹⁵ Ibid., verse 30:58

¹⁶ Ibid., verse 36:37

¹⁷ Ibid., verse 17:18

¹⁸ Ibid., verse 25:9

¹⁹ Ibid., verse 3:17

²⁰ Ibid., verse 25:39

²¹ Ibid., verse 6:38

²² Ibid., verse 56:61

²³ Ibid., verse 6:160

²⁴ Ibid., verse 47:10

²⁵ Ibid., verse 47:3

²⁶ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Qur'an: Text, Translation & Commentary*, Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an; U.S. Edition 2005 edition, 1987

²⁷ *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, Merriam Webster, 2002

²⁸ Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali, Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *Noble Quran English Translation*, verse 2:17

²⁹ Ibid., verse 2:171

³⁰ Ibid., verse 2:261

³¹ Ibid., verse 2:264

³² Ibid., verse 14:18

³³ Ibid., verse 22:73

³⁴ Ibid., verse 24:39

³⁵ Ibid., verse 29:41

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