

The Quran and its Message

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Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

ARE MUTASHABIH VERSES ALLEGORICAL?

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It is often alleged that the Quran's 'mutashabih' verses refer to 'allegories' in the Quran. This is not entirely an accurate portrayal and is usually a result of a misunderstanding of key Arabic terms and an inconsistency with translations.

The Quran often coins **parables or a similitude** and uses the Arabic word '**mathal**' to describe them. Verses which cite them often make it **absolutely clear** that such a parable has been cited (mathal) which God wants mankind to reflect and ponder over. They intend to drive an underlying moral teaching. These parables are no different in nature to those found in Prophet Jesus's ^(pbuh) teachings which can be referenced from the canonical Gospels.

There are numerous such parables found in the Quran.

- (1) The Man that kindled a fire (2:17-18)
- (2) Rain-laden cloud (2:19-20)
- (3) The one who shouts at what does not hear (2:171)
- (4) A hamlet in ruins (2:259)
- (5) Grain of corn (2:261)
- (6) The rock on which falls heavy rain (2:264)
- (7) The frost (3:117)
- (8) The dog that lolls his tongue (7:176)
- (9) Water sent from the skies (10:24)
- (10) Blind and the deaf (11:24)
- (11) Gardens of felicity (13:35)
- (12) Actions of ashes (14:18)
- (13) Good word like a good tree (14:24)
- (14) Evil word and an evil tree (14:26)

- (15) Slave and a free man (16:75)
- (16) A dumb man against one who commands justice (16:76)
- (17) Woman who unravels her yarn (16:92)
- (18) City secure yet ungrateful (16:112)
- (19) Two men and gardens of grape vines (18:32)
- (20) Life of this world and rain (18:45)
- (21) Snatched by the birds or the wind carries away (22:31)
- (22) Cannot create a fly (22:73)
- (23) God's light (24:35-36)
- (24) Mirage in a desert (24:39)
- (25) Depths of darkness (24:40)
- (26) Spider's house (29:41)
- (27) Partners (30:28)
- (28) Companions of the city and three messengers (36:13-32)
- (29) One master and several masters (39:29)
- (30) Gardens promised for believers (47:15)
- (31) Seed that grows (48:29)
- (32) Rain which causes vegetation to grow (57:20)
- (33) The mountain that humbles (59:21)
- (34) Donkey carrying books (62:5)

If there is a 'mathal' that God cites but **does not want believers to pursue**, He makes this **absolutely clear** in the Quran itself. For example the 'mathal' in verses 74:30-31 regarding the number '19' has been cited by implication as one **not to be pursued**.

074:031 (part)

"...and the disbelievers and those in whose hearts is a disease may say "What does God intend by this example (Arabic: mathalan)?"

Please see related article [1] below.

Similarly, there are numerous verses in the Quran in which one finds the 'huroof-e-muqqatat' (disjointed letters) over which there is no plausible consensus or established meaning. These would clearly be part of the 'mutashibih' of the Quran and would in view of 3:7 not require an interpretation (tawil) to be pursued.

Please see related article [2] below.

WHAT DOES 'MUTASHABIH' MEAN FROM A QURAN'S PERSPECTIVE?

The root from which 'mutashabih' takes form is **SH-B-H** and the verb '**tashabbaha**' which means to be similar, alike, to resemble one another **and in contrast**, can also mean **ambiguous**.

The word almost appears to be a best described as an auto-antonym where it provides opposite meanings depending on context. For example, this would be no different from the English word 'apparent' which can mean 'obvious' or 'something in fact' and in another context can also mean 'seeming' and not being clear but rather, uncertain.

In verse 3:7 of the Quran, 'mutashabih' is presented as a contrast to the Arabic term 'muhkam'.

003:007 (part)

"He it is Who has revealed to you the Book: In it are verses 'muhkamatun' they are the foundation of the Book and others are 'mutashabihatun'..."

'Muhkam' is derived from the verb 'ahkama' which means clear, decisive, confirmed and would refer to verses which are the substance and foundation of the Book in clear Arabic.

Therefore, 'mutashabih' as a contrasted term to 'muhkam' in verse 3:7 would then be best understood as '**obscure, unclear, dubious or ambiguous**' and **not allegorical**. These verses would **not** be the focus of the Book.

In contrast to verse 3:7, 'mutashabih' appears in its opposite and primary meaning in verse 39:23 and is used to describe the entire Quran.

039:023 (part)

"God has revealed the best statement (Arabic: hadith), a Book with its parts resembling each other (Arabic: mutashabihan) ..."

Classical lexicons pick up the discussion and it is noted how the meaning of 'ambiguous' (A) was also posited as being derived from its primary meaning of semblance and something being consimilar. [2]

8. اِشْتَبَّهَا and تَشَابَهًا They resembled each other so that they became confounded, or confused, or dubious. [2] (K.) And اِشْتَبَّه (S, MA) and تَشَابَه (MA) It (a thing, S, MA, or an affair, MA) was, or became, ambiguous, dubious, or obscure, (MA,) عَلَيَّ [to me], (S,) or عَلَيْهِ [to him]: (MA:) and عَلَيْهِ الْأَمْرُ شَبَّهَ the thing, or affair, was rendered confused, or dubious, to him: (K, * TA:) and شَبَّهَ الشَّيْءُ, also, [see مُشْتَبَّه,] the thing was, or became, confused, or dubious. (IAq, TA.)

A مُشْتَبِهٌ [part. n. of 8, q. v.]. مُشْتَبِهَاتٌ, (S,) and
 † مُشْتَبِهَاتٌ, [thus agreeably with an explanation of
 its verb by IAqr, (see 8, last sentence,)] (JK,) or
 † أُمُورٌ مُشْتَبِهَةٌ, and † مُشْتَبِهَةٌ like مُعْظَمَةٌ, (K,) *Things,*
or affairs, that are confused or dubious [by reason
of their resembling one another or from any other [2]
cause]: (JK, S, K:) [and uncertain: (see an ex.
of مُشْتَبِهٌ in this sense in a verse cited voce سَنَفُ:)]
 † مُشْتَبِهَاتٌ وَغَيْرُ مُشْتَبِهَاتٍ, in the K̄ur [vi. 98], means
resembling one another so that they become con-
founded, or confused, or dubious, and not re-
sembling one another &c. (TA.)

مُشْتَبِهَةٌ *Consimilar, or conformable, in its several*
parts: thus مُشْتَبِهَاتٌ means in the K̄ur xxxix. 24.
 (Jel.) And مُشْتَبِهَاتٌ *Things like, or resembling,*
one another. (JK, S.) — See also A *—*
 مُشْتَبِهَاتٌ *in the K̄ur iii. 5 means Verses that are*
equivocal, or ambiguous; i. e. susceptible of diffe-
rent interpretations: (Ksh:) or verses unintelli-
gible; such as the commencements [of many] of
the chapters: (Jel:) or the مُشْتَبِهَةٌ in the K̄ur is
that of which the meaning is not to be learned
from its words; and this is of two sorts; one is
that of which the meaning is known by referring
it to what is termed مُحْكَمٌ [q. v.]; and the other
is that of which the knowledge of its real meaning
is not attainable in any way: (TA:) or it means
what is not understood without repeated con-

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [1]

DO NOT PURSUE WHAT IS 'MUTASHABIH'

Furthermore, if 'mutashabih' verses are considered 'allegories', this would pose a conflict within the Quran, which makes it absolutely clear that such verses **should not be pursued**. Such verses as the Quran claims are only pursued by the perverted of hearts (qulubihim zayghun) and those that intend to cause 'fitna' (discord / corruption) and seek its interpretation (tawil)

003:007

"...Then as for those in whose hearts (**qulubihim**) is perversity (**zayghun**), so they follow what is '**tashabaha**' (obscure, unclear) of it seeking discord (**fitna**) and seeking its interpretation (**tawil**)..."

FINAL THOUGHTS

Much like the Bible, the Quran also cites 'parables' (**mathal**) for mankind's reflection. However this should **not** be confused with '**mutashabih**' which according to the Quran are **not** to be pursued or their interpretations (tawil) sought. 'Mutashabih' in the context of verse 3:7 should be seen as a contrast to 'muhkam' (clear, decisive, confirmed) and best rendered as 'obscure, ambiguous and unclear' and not so much as allegorical. Many confuse 'mutashabih' with 'mathal' which are two differently nuanced Arabic terms.

Related Articles:

- (1) [Code 19 and the Removal of Two Verses from the Quran - A Problematic Theory](#)
- (2) [Huroof-e-Muqqatat \(Disjointed Letters\)](#)

REFERENCES

[1] LANE. E.W, Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 4, Page 1500

Highlights marked in red on the lexicon excerpt are my own insertions. They have no bearing on the original text other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

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