

The Quran and its Message

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سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

ARE THERE SEVEN HEAVENS OR SEVERAL HEAVENS?

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It is commonly understood that the reference to '**saba**' denotes '**seven**' as in the case of '**seven heavens**'. This indeed is the general case, for example:

012:043	In the story of Yusuf and in a dream, a king sees 7 fat cows being eaten by 7 lean ones and 7 green ears of corns and 7 dried ones
012:047-48	Joseph interprets the dream as 7 hard years following 7 normal years
018:022	Story of the cave, guessing at the number of the sleepers
002:196	Fasting of seven days on returning home (out of 10)
069:007	Aad's punishment - 7 long nights and 8 long days

However, in classical Arabic, the word '**Saba**' (Arabic) was never restricted to denote 7. This word was often used to imply an '**exaggeration**' or an expression of '**multitude**', '**several**' or '**many**'. It was also used to indicate a vagueness of number but signifying a multiplicity or a large number. This was also the case with the number 70.

Here is an extract from the classical lexicons to confirm this point.

لَكَ سَبْعَ أَلْفَ مَرَّةٍ May God give thee thy reward, or recompense, seven times, or seven fold. (K, TA.) The Arabs also said, لَكَ أَجْرًا سَبْعًا May God multiply to thee the reward, or recompense, for it; meaning, for this good act: (Aboo-Sa'eed:) [for] تَسْبِيعٌ is used by them to signify the act of multiplying, though it be more than seven fold. (TA.) And سَبَعَ اللَّهُ لِفُلَانٍ is used as meaning May God make a thing to be followed by another thing to such a one; in relation to

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [1]

(K.) — See also أَسْبُوعٌ; last sentence. — [سَبْعَةٌ] is also used in a vague manner, as meaning Seven or more; or several; or many; as Bd says, in ix. 81, and as is indicated, though not plainly declared, in the TA. See 2: and see also سَبْعُونَ.

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [2]

سَبْعُونَ [Seventy;] a well-known number; (K;) the round number that is between سِتُونَ and ثَمَانُونَ. (TA.) — The Arabs also use it as meaning [Seventy or more; or] many. (TA.) Thus it is used in the Kur [ix. 81], where it is said, إِنْ تَسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ سَبْعِينَ مَرَّةً فَلَنْ يَغْفِرَ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ,

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [3]

The Kuran [ix.81] reference above is given below:

009:080

“Whether you ask for their forgiveness, or not, (their sin is unforgivable): if you ask **seventy times** for their forgiveness, God will not forgive them: because they have rejected God and His Messenger: and God guides not those who are perversely rebellious”

As can be clearly noted, the word ‘Saba’ has also been understood and used by the classical Arabs to signify 'several' or 'many'.

WHERE MULTIPLICITY MAY BE A BETTER RENDERING

(K.) — See also **أَسْبُوعٌ**; last sentence. — **سَبْعَةٌ** is also used in a vague manner, as meaning Seven or more; or several; or many; as Bd says, in ix. 81, and as is indicated, though not plainly declared, in the TA. See 2: and see also **سَبْعُونَ**.

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [4]

031:027

"And if all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea, **with seven / [several] more seas to help it**, (were ink), the words of God could not be exhausted. Lo! God is Mighty, Wise"

If we note the theme of the above verse, specifically with regards the 'sea', it becomes clear that the 'seven' denotes a multiplicity if compared with the similar verse below (18:109) which carries the same theme.

018:109

"Say: If the sea were ink for the words of my Lord, the sea would surely be consumed before the words of my Lord are exhausted, **though We were to bring the like of that (sea) to supplement**"

Other examples where 'multiplicity' is implied are:

015:43-44

"And surely Hell is the promised place of them all. **It has seven / [several] gates**; for every gate there shall be a separate party of them"

002:261

"The parable of those who spend their substance in the way of God is that of a grain of corn: **it grows seven / [several] ears**, and each ear has a hundred grains. God gives **manifold increase** to whom He pleases: And God cares for all and He knows all things"

HEAVENS AND EARTH AND THEIR MULTIPLICITY

'Saba' is also used to denote the number of heavens in numerous verses and as in the example below.

002:029

"He it is Who created for you all that is in the earth. Then turned He to the heaven, and fashioned it as **seven (Arabic: Saba) heavens**. And He is knower of all things"

إِلَى السَّمَاءِ فَسَوَّيْنَهُنَّ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ

Saba

Illustration - Joseph Islam

However, one notes in the verse below, which deals with the heavens, the number of **Earths** are also mentioned with a similar likeness as that of the heavens.

065:012

"God is He Who created seven heavens, and of the Earth the like of them; the decree continues to descend among them, that you may know that God has power over all things and that God indeed encompasses all things in (His) knowledge"

What is being compared?

- Here a literal rendering as **seven** becomes difficult to sustain from a Quranic and scientific perspective. The seven heavens in this case would imply that there are seven earths which is an unwarranted restriction both linguistically in terms of expression and scientifically.

However, in line with the classical understanding of 'seven' to also denote 'multiplicity', several heavens would imply several earths. This would therefore be an indication of the billions of galactic systems which contain billions of stellar objects many (if not all of which) have their own planetary objects.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We do the Quran a great disservice by restricting the rendering of particular words even though they have always been understood to carry a wider meaning. However, good commentators do actually make known the wider remits of the words as understood by the classical Arabs (often in their footnotes), which is a credit to their honesty, hard work and analysis.

REFERENCES

[1] LANE. E.W, Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 4, Page 1296

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.

[2] Ibid., Page 1297

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

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