



ALI 572: 'Ilm al-Ghayb Knowledge of the Unseen

Academy for Learning Islam

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SESSION 1: Rabi al-Awwal 6, 1442 | Oct 23, 2020

Outline

- Importance of the Subject
- Our Approach
- Definitions
- Critical Questions
- Qur'anic Verses
- Resources
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Importance of the Subject

1

Understanding the basis for Shia belief in the Imams' (a) knowledge of the unseen.

2

Resolving theological questions between knowledge of the unseen and the actions of the Prophet (s) and Imams (a).

3

Resolving seemingly conflicting verses and traditions on this subject.

Our Approach

- Understand kalamī positions and their basis.
- Define Qur'anic and kalamī terms.
- Develop understanding of critical questions.
- Study Qur'anic verses in light of these questions.
- Study conflicting traditions and their explanation.
- Study rational arguments and their basis.

Definition

- Ghayb (غيب) is from ghaba-yaghibu, meaning to be concealed or covered.
 - E.g. Ghaba al-shamsu, the sun has been concealed, i.e. it has set.
- Qur'an: ghayb is anything that cannot be observed by the physical senses. Ex. Allah (S), angels, revelation, hereafter etc.

Who believe in the Unseen, and maintain the prayer, and spend out of what We have provided for them; (2:3)

- Ghayb can also include knowledge of the past, future, people's thoughts, various skills and languages etc.

Critical Questions

1. Essential (dhatiyy) vs. acquired (iktisabiyy)
 - Is the knowledge of the Imams (a) essential to them, or acquired by them?
2. Actual (fi'liyy) vs. potential.
 - Do the Imams (a) know everything at every time, or do they know only when Allah (S) wants them to know?
3. Absolute vs. limited
 - Do the Imams (a) know all the unseen, or a part of the unseen?

Qur'anic Verses (1)

- Qur'anic verses can be divided into three categories.

Category 1: Verses that affirm 'ilm al-ghayb only for Allah (S)

With Him are the treasures of the Unseen; no one knows them except Him. He knows whatever there is in land and sea. (6:59)

Say, "No one in the heavens or the earth knows the Unseen except Allah, and they are not aware when they will be resurrected." (27:65)

Qur'anic Verses (1)

- Indications of these verses:
 1. Allah (S) has knowledge of the unseen.
 2. The knowledge of the unseen essentially belongs to Him, and only Him.
 3. Such verses are silent on whether this knowledge is given to His creatures or not.

Qur'anic Verses (2)

Category 2: Negating independent and absolute knowledge of the unseen from His creatures.

Say, "I have no control over any benefit for myself nor [over] any harm except what Allah may wish. Had I known the Unseen, I would have acquired much good, and no ill would have befallen me."
(7:188)

"I do not say to you that I possess the treasures of Allah, neither do I know the Unseen." (11:31)

Qur'anic Verses (2)

- Indications of these verses:
 1. These verses have theological implications and should not be limited to their ethical implications. (Āyatullāh Ja'far Subhaniyy).
 2. They also seem to imply that the Prophet of Allah (S) does not have knowledge of all the unseen.
Argument: If he did, then he would acquire much goodness and little or no harm.
 3. The verse also implies that this is neither a perfection for a human being, nor the role of the Prophet (s).

Qur'anic Verses (3)

Category 3: Some knowledge of the unseen is made available to Prophets, Imams and some human beings.

Prophets: Knower of the Unseen, He does not disclose His Unseen to anyone, except to an apostle He approves of. Then He dispatches a sentinel before and behind him (72:26-27)

Distinguished human beings: Lady Maryam (a) about the birth of Prophet Isa (a)

All human beings: The prophecy of the victory of the Romans.

Qur'anic Verses (3)

- Indication of these verses:
 1. Prophets and Imams have knowledge of the unseen.
 2. Some human being have more knowledge of the unseen than others.
 3. This knowledge is given to them by Allah (S).
 4. This knowledge is limited to what Allah (S) makes known to them.

Resources

- Knowledge of the Unseen: Commentary of Verse 20 of Sūrat al-Hujarat by Āyatullāh Ja‘far Subhaniyy.

<https://www.al-islam.org/islamic-moral-system-commentary-surah-hujurat-jafar-subhani/knowledge-unseen>

- ‘Ilm al-Ghayb: Knowledge of the Unseen by Islamic Education of the WF.

<https://www.world-federation.org/sites/default/files/Knowledge%20of%20the%20Unseen.pdf>

Your Questions

