

DAILY QUR'ANIC REFLECTIONS

From Juz' 25: Not a thing is like Him

فَاطِرُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۗ جَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِّنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا وَمِنَ الْأَنْعَامِ أَزْوَاجًا يَذُرُّكُمْ فِيهِ ۗ لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ ۗ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ

The originator of the heavens and the earth, He made for you mates from your own selves, and mates of the cattle, by which means He multiplies you. *Not a thing is like Him, and He is the All-hearing, the All-seeing.* (Shūrā 42:11)

Reflections:

Is it possible to fathom God's attributes? Is it the case that when God describes Himself in the Qur'ān, we understand from that description what we understand when we hear the same words being used of people? Or is God beyond any description to the point where any attribution of Him in the Qur'ān is to be taken metaphorically for something we cannot even imagine? Each of these perspectives taken in isolation is erroneous. The first one leads to corporealizing the divine—i.e., attributing human-like, limitative, and bodily qualities to God. The second one implies turning off the intellect—the greatest gift we have—in terms of gaining knowledge of God. Imam Ali (‘a) says: “He has not informed the intellects about the extent of his qualities; yet He has not hidden from them that which is necessary of knowing Him.”¹

Although all of the Qur'ān is light, there are some verses that are brighter than others. According to some of the *mufasssīrīn*, one of the *most definitive verses* in the Qur'ān is the last portion of the above verse: “Not a thing is like Him.” It is part of the mother of the Book, whose task is to nurture more ambiguous (or allegorical) verses thereby making them definitive as well: “It is He who has sent down to you the Book. Parts of it are definitive verses, which are the mother of the Book, while others are allegorical.”² The above verse in Surah Shūrā is meant to help shed light on all of the other verses of the Qur'ān.

Therefore, when God describes Himself as *al-Ḥayy* (the Ever-Living), the definitive nurturing verse of “Not a thing is like Him” helps us realize that though we may also be *ḥayy* (living), we cannot attribute our scientific understanding of biological life—including aspects such as growth, reproduction, metabolism, etc.—to Allah (swt). Not only is our own life dependent on God's Ever-Livingness, and not only is our limited life a mere shadow of His unlimited ever-flowing Life, but there is also a qualitative difference between the two in terms of what we understand by the term “living”.

But this should not take us to the other extreme of denying the intellect's ability to fathom the attributes of Allah (swt), or to deny them altogether, because the verse also ends with two of God's most beautiful names. Suffice is to say that the attributes that God describes Himself with, far from being utterly unintelligible, are conduits through which we can come to know and gain proximity to Him: “Only to Allah belong the most beautiful Names, so call on Him by them.”³

The verse from Sūrah Shūrā, then, is actually a beautiful example in which God's similarity (*tashbīh*) with creation and His dissimilarity (*tanzīh*) from it come together. The first part (“Not a thing is like Him”) outwardly speaks of dissimilarity, yet the second part (“and He is the All-hearing, the All-seeing”) outwardly references similarity. Interestingly, latent within each part lies the opposite—an explanation we cannot give now—but it does highlight the idea that the most appropriate position regarding God's attributes is one that affirms knowledge of them without limiting them to what meets the eye.

To ponder: How does calling on Allah through His most beautiful Names help us gain proximity to Him?

References: Āyatullāh Jawādī Āmulī, *Tafsīr Tasnīm*, *Tawḥīd dar Qur'ān*, and *Qur'ān dar Qur'ān*.

¹ *Nahj al-balaghah*, Sermon 49.

² 3:7

³ 7:180