

Who can understand *mutashabih* Ayah? Quran 3:7 analysis

By Khurshid Imam

A. Introduction

Mr. XYZ - a staunch critic of islam and religions quoted Quran 3:7 to show me that Quran cannot be God's word.

"When Quran itself says that there are some portions of Quran that can never ever be understood by human being. It means that Quran is non-sense book, it's against rationality and it is not a divine scripture"

So what is this fuss all about? Does Quran say that some portion of Quran no human being can ever understand? If YES then why Quran so? If NO then why people believe so? Lets have a look.

B. No one can understand meaning of *mutashabih* Ayah?

The ayah under discussion is from Surah Ale-Imran, Ayah No 7:

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ
وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَابَهَ مِنْهُ
ابْتِغَاءَ الْفِتْنَةِ وَابْتِغَاءَ تَأْوِيلِهِ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالرَّاسِخُونَ
فِي الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ ءَامَنَّا بِهِ كُلٌّ مِنْ عِنْدِ رَبِّنَا وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّا أُولُو
الْأَلْبَابِ ﴿٧﴾

"He it is Who has revealed the Book to you; some of its verses are decisive, they are the basis of the Book, and others are allegorical; then as for those in whose hearts there is perversity they follow the part of it which is allegorical, seeking to mislead and seeking to give it (their own) interpretation. **but none knows its interpretation except Allah, and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge** say: We believe in it, it is all from our Lord; and none do mind except those having understanding." Quran 3:7 Translation by Shakir

So the ayah says that:

1. Quran contains two types of Ayah:

a. *Muhakkam* Ayah : refers to those ayah which are decisive, fundamentals, straight forward. Their command are straight to the point. These ayah are the mother of the book i.e. base of the Quran.

b. *Mutashabih* Ayah: refers to those ayah which has similar meanings as that conveyed through text OR they have allegorical meaning. *Mutashabih* ayah can have more than one meaning. Literal understanding of *mutashabih* ayah can result in improper and false understanding of the ayah sometimes.

2. Those people in whose heart there is perversity and they want to create *fitnah* (anarchy, disturbance) - they follow *mutashabih* ayah by giving interpretation that goes against *Muhakkam* ayah.

3. Now here is the crux of the article. This part can be interpreted in two different ways:

A. But No one knows the interpretation of *Mutashabih* Ayah except Allah. AND those who are firm in knowledge

OR

B. But No one knows the interpretation of *Mutashabih* Ayah except Allah AND those who are firm in knowledge.

Note the difference in full stop in above two statements.

4. They say - "We believe in it, it is all from our Lord".

5. But it is only those who are with UNDERSTANDING that they will take heed / they will grasp.

It is the BOLD portion that is mainly under discussion. There has been difference of opinion among scholars regarding how that part of Ayah can be read.

First opinion: says that reader of Quran should STOP at "... **but none knows its interpretation except Allah**" and THEN after pausing; reader should read "**and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say.....**". This is the view of majority of scholars. Tafseer Ibn kaseer refers to Hazrat Ayesha for this view. This opinion concludes that ONLY Allah - and no one else - knows the interpretation of *Mutashabih* ayah.

Second opinion: One need NOT to pause. Then one should read - ".. **but none knows its interpretation except Allah and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge**. They say"

Tafsir ibn kaseer quotes Hazrat Mujahid and Hazrat Ibn abbas in support of this opinion. This opinion concludes that only Allah AND those who are firmly grounded in knowledge know interpretation of *mutashabih* ayah.

C. Why to pause at "... except Allah"?

There are certain letters in Arabic that are used in Quran for various types of punctuation. For example in English we have-- a. Full Stop . b. Comma , c. Colon : d. Semi-colon ; Punctuation marks in Arabic are called - Rumuz al-Awqaf.

Rumuz al-Awqaf: Stop Signs

["Another useful step taken to facilitate recitation and phonetically correct pronunciation (*tilawah* and *tajwid*) was to provide signs with Qur'anic sentences which could tell the nature of making a stop (breathing) there. These signs are known as the '*rumaz*' (signs) or '*alamat* (symbols) of *awqaf* (stops). Their purpose is to help a person who does not know Arabic to stop at the correct spot during his recitation, and thus, avoid causing a change in meaning by breaking his breath at the wrong spot. .. Details about these signs are given below:

ط : This letter Ta' is an abbreviated form of al-waqf al-mutlaq. It means that the statement stands completed at this point. Therefore, it is better to stop here.

ج : This letter Jim is an abbreviation of al-waqf al ja'iz and it means that it is permissible to stop here.

ز : This letter Za' is an abbreviation of al-waqf al-mujawwaz. It means that making a stop here is correct all right, but the better choice is not to make a stop here.

م : This letter mim is an abbreviation of al-waqf al-lazim. It means if a stop is not made here an outrageous distortion in the meaning of the verse is possible. So, it is better to stop here. ***Some phoneticians of the Qur'an have also called this al-waqf al-wajib or the obligatory stop. But this is not 'wajib' of fiqh which brings sin if abandoned.*** In fact, the purpose is to stress that making a stop here is the most preferable of all stops (al-Nashr, 1/231).

ل : This letter la is an abbreviation of " la" taqif. It means 'do not stop here,' but it does not imply that making a stop here is impermissible, because there are certain places bearing this sign where making a stop brings no harm and making an initiation from the following word is also permissible. Therefore, the correct meaning of this sign is: If a stop is made here, it is better to go back and read over again. Initiation from the next word is not approved (al-Nashr, 1/233).]
Source: [http://www.as-sidq.org/durusulQuran/articles/mariful.html#Rumuz al-Awqaf: Stop Signs](http://www.as-sidq.org/durusulQuran/articles/mariful.html#Rumuz%20al-Awqaf%3A%20Stop%20Signs)

Important point:

Punctuation marks in Quran were added by Scholars after death of Prophet. Intention was to make reading easier for those who were not well aware of Quranic Arabic. It is said that punctuation marks of the Quran were put by Hajjaj bin Yousuf in 73 Hijri. In present case we find *al-waqf al-lazim* in Quran 3:7 after "**... except Allah**", but it should be very clear that this was done by people order to make recitation easier. So this addition of punctuation marks is neither divine nor infallible. Scholars thought that stopping here in 3:7 would be BETTER from meaning point of view as its clear by the description of *al-waqf al-lazim* - "**Some phoneticians of the Qur'an have also called this al-waqf al-wajib or the obligatory stop. But this is not 'wajib' of fiqh which brings sin if abandoned.**"

D. Disturbing Questions

Let's come to the original question. Should one STOP at "**... except Allah**" or not? If we respond by YES then there are some disturbing questions that remain unanswered. You are saying that ONLY Allah knows meaning of *mutashabih* ayah. Is it possible?

1. Quran is revealed for mankind or NOT? Answer is - YES.

If MANKIND is supposed to read and understand Quran then how it is possible that God will reveal ayah which human being will NEVER EVER be able to understand??? It's not possible, common says that if human being is the recipient then it's absurd to say that some ayah of Quran no one can ever understand.

2. What will be wisdom behind revealing some ayah for a community who can never ever understand? By this logic: a Hindu / a Christian / a Buddhist can present hundreds of verses from their scriptures as divine verses and word of God just by saying - "Do not ask us meaning of these verses. Only God knows meaning of these verses. You need to just believe in it as God's word". Is this logical?

2. When you say that some Ayah of quran - no one can understand except Allah then it means you agree that even Prophet Muhammad - on whom Quran was revealed, did not know meaning of such ayah. Do you agree with this?

3. Billion dollar question is: When there is no full stop at "**... except Allah**" then why we are assuming so? If Allah wanted to convey that no one knows meaning of *Mutashabih* Ayah except Allah then surely he would have made it a separate Ayah. In present case the ayah does not end at "**... except Allah**" rather it continues.

4. The Quran tells us repeatedly that it is easy to understand. Refer 5:15; 11:1; 26:195; 54:17; 55:1-2.

Only sincere people possess the qualities necessary to understand the Quran (as emphasized in 17:46; 18:57; and 54:17). It is beyond dispute that the Quran encourages Muslims to study its words with patience. It advises us not to rush into understanding without sufficient knowledge (20:114). Then how it's possible that same Quran will teach that some portion of Quran no human being can ever understand?

4. Last but not least: Who will decide what all are *mutashabih* ayah of Quran? Who will prepare list of *muhakkam* ayah and *mutashabih* ayah? Of course it's impossible.

{ The same ayah can be *muhakkam* for someone and *mutashabih* for other. With the passage of time *mutashabih* ayah will convert into *Muhakkam* ayah with more pondering, more knowledge and more reasoning. The fact of the matter is that in its respective perspective: whole Quran is *muhakkam* and whole Quran is *mutashabih*.

Quran is referred as book of *Muhakkam* ayah in 11:1 Kitabun - Uhkimat (The Book of *Muhkimaat*)

Quran is referred as Book of *Mutashabih* Ayah in 39:23 Kitaban - *Mutashabihan* Misani (The book of *Mutashabihat*)

This whole topic is beyond the scope of this article. }

So we find gross problems in first opinion. Better and Quranic understanding is that its Allah AND those who are firm in knowledge who can understand meaning of *Mutashabih* Ayah.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali, pickthall etc have translated this ayah in such a way that reader assume that "...no one knows its [true] interpretation except Allah..", and they treat next part as SEPARATE ayah "... And those firm in knowledge say..".

On the other hand Shakir, rashad khaleefa etc have translated without giving any punctuation.

However Abdullah Yusuf Ali mention in footnote of 3:7: "One reading, rejected by the majority of Commentators, but accepted by Mujahid and others, would not make a break at the point marked *Waqfa Lazim*, but would run the two sentences together. In that case the construction would run: 'No one knows its hidden meanings except God and those who are firm in knowledge. They say', etc.")

In recent era, great scholar like Shah Walilullah Dehlavi has also questioned validity of stopping at "... except Allah" in this ayah.

The ayah does NOT end at "... except Allah" and common sense and this ayah of Quran makes clear that *Mutashabih* ayah of Quran can be understood by those people who have STRONG KNOWLEDGE. Of course this involves THINKING, UNDERSTANDING, USING BRAIN, USING intellect. Time and again Quran has emphasized readers to ponder over the book.

E. Conclusion

1. Punctuation marks in Quran were added by Hajjaj bin Yusuf, the governor of Iraq under the Umayyad rule; much ahead of era of prophet. Intention was to make recitation easier.

2. Quran 3:7 contains *al-waqf al-lazim* (One of Punctuation marks). Stopping here is preferred by some scholars from meaning point of view; on the other hand some scholars say that not stopping here is better.

3. There are two opinions regarding how this ayah can be read.

First opinion gives idea: **But No one knows the interpretation of *Mutashabih* Ayah except Allah.**

Second opinion gives idea: **But No one knows the interpretation of *Mutashabih* Ayah except Allah AND those who are firm in knowledge.**

4. Second opinion sounds more rationale, more Quranic and more logical.

5. So *mutashabih* Ayah can be understood by people who are very firm in knowledge.

Note: If you don't agree with the article then instead of giving fatwa of kurf / shirk / deviation – have faith in Allah and leave it to him to judge.

Feedback / criticism can be given to serviceforhumanity@gmail.com OR info@serviceforhumanity.in

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