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Man's Excellence

Man's Excellence over All Creation

Perhaps all of you are aware that man is أشرف and أفضل الكائنات (the greatest of all creation). This is understood from the Qur'aan and 'aql (common sense).

We read in the Qur'aan وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ وَحَمَلْنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى كَثِيرٍ مِمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا تَفْضِيلًا (We honoured the children of Adam, We carried them on the land and the sea, We sustained them with pure things and We gave them excellence over the rest of our creation). Literally the word كَثِيرٍ means many. Hence, a literal translation of the last part of this aayah would be: *We gave بَنِي آدَمَ excellence over much of our creation.* However, the purport of the aayah is that Allah gave بَنِي آدَمَ (man) excellence over the rest of His creation.

Besides the Qur'aan, 'aql (common sense) also indicates that man must be the greatest of all the creation of Allah. The reason for this is that while man does whatever he desires with the rest of the creation, none of the creation does anything to man. Man farms, mines and develops the land. He investigates its peculiarities and using the yields of the earth he invents things for the betterment of his life. Likewise, he enjoys the warmth and light of the sun, and using solar power he generates electricity which is then used to drive the economy. Yet the earth

and the sun do not do anything similar to man. Many more examples of this sort may be cited. Instead, we will suffice with the aayah

أَلَمْ تَرَوْا أَنَّ اللَّهَ سَخَّرَ لَكُمْ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَأَسْبَغَ عَلَيْكُمْ نِعَمَهُ ظَاهِرَةً وَبَاطِنَةً

Do you not see that Allah subdued for you everything in the skies and everything in the earth and He showered His outer and inner favours on you?

The emphasis at this juncture is on the word لَكُمْ (for you) i.e. Allah's message to man is that He created everything in the skies and the earth to serve man. Yet, in the light of this aayah and so many others, man was not created to serve anybody or anything other than Allah. Moreover, this announcement was not made in favour of any other creation besides man. This is sufficient proof of man's أفضلية (excellence) over the rest of the creation.

The Reason

Some of the حكماء (philosophers) claimed that the reason for man's excellence over all other creation is عقل (the faculty of understanding). However, this claim of the حكماء (philosophers) is somewhat debatable. Do animals not possess a certain level of عقل? After all, man uses his عقل mainly to reason. Don't animals also reason? If, upon entering a certain area, a dog is hit with a stick, it will not re-enter the same place a few minutes later due to fear of receiving another hiding. So, like man, the dog also uses its عقل to reason.

Well of course, there is a huge difference between the عقل of the two. Man has more عقل and the dog has less. This, however, does not affect the validity of our objection because even among humans we see varying levels of عقل. Some people have more عقل and others have less. Yet, despite having less عقل than others, no human being is described as not having any عقل at all.

A Second Possibility

Based on the above, other حكماء (philosophers) were of the opinion that man's excellence is based on علم (knowledge) rather than عقل. From all the creation of Allah, only man has been favoured with علم (knowledge). However, this too is not entirely correct. In the Qur'aan علم is attributed to every other creation as well.

كُلٌّ قَدْ عَلِمَ صَلَاتَهُ وَتَسْبِيحَهُ

Each one (of the creation) definitely knows its salaah and its tasbeeh.

Not only man engages in salaah and tasbeeh. In the light of this aayah every other creation also does so. In fact, let alone animate objects, even inanimate objects do so. Of course, this does not mean that their salaah and tasbeeh are the same as that of man. The mode and particulars of their salaah and tasbeeh need not be discussed at this juncture. The focus at this moment is merely that:

- They all engage in salaah and tasbeeh.
- They all know their salaah and tasbeeh.

In short, this aayah proves that like man, jinn, angels, the animals, the trees, the mountains, the stones etc. also have some amount of knowledge. Once again, the nature and level of their knowledge is much different from that of man. However, having lesser knowledge than man does not mean that they should be classified as not having any knowledge at all. Otherwise, how would we explain the different levels of knowledge among individual human beings?

Another aspect in this regard is that, unlike man's knowledge which is to a great extent كسبي ('earned' – man has to work for it, he has study to attain it), the knowledge of the angels is طبعي (instinctive). Being instinctive means that:

- The angels do not attain their knowledge from each other.
- They do not share their knowledge with each other.
- Every angel's knowledge is for himself only.

A Third Possibility

This brings us to a third possibility regarding the reason for man's excellence over all other creation viz. teaching – the ability to share knowledge. This is undoubtedly a unique feature of man. Neither the angels nor the jinn share this quality of man. Thus, while we have heard of the various duties of the four great angels, we have not heard of which angel is responsible for educating the rest of the angels.

Rasulullah sallallahu alaihi wasallam

In a famous hadith Rasulullah sallallahu alaihi wasallam described himself as a teacher. He said

إِنَّمَا بُعِثْتُ مُعَلِّمًا

I am sent as a teacher.

Rasulullah sallallahu alaihi wasallam had such vast knowledge that he is the greatest ‘aalim after Allah. Nobody besides Allah has, had or will have more knowledge besides him. However, as much as being an ‘aalim is a tremendous accomplishment, ability to make others ‘ulama like one’s self is even greater. Looking at the blessed life of Rasulullah sallallahu alaihi wasallam, his greatest and most remarkable achievement was that he produced approximately one hundred and twenty thousand examples of himself and his teachings, approximately one hundred and twenty thousand individuals who, through his تعليم and تربية (teaching and nurturing) were living examples of the Qur’aan and Sunnah. Individual examples of how Rasulullah sallallahu alaihi wasallam are just too many for this short article.

Nubuwwah is Ta’leem

The reason why Rasulullah sallallahu alaihi wasallam was a مُعَلِّم (teacher) is that the word نبوة is derived from الإنباء which means to inform and pass information. In other words, the gist of نبوة is تعليم

Now, returning to the topic of the reason for man’s excellence over the rest of the creation, Qari Muhammad Tayyib (ra) adds that if nubuwwah is the highest position among the creation, the

gist of نبوة is تعليم and نبوة is not found in any other creation besides man (no man jinn or angel was ever appointed as a nabi), then we conclude that the reason for man's excellence over the rest of the creation is تعليم (his ability to teach).

Man Will Perish . . .

The crux of the above is that تعليم is a خصوصية (speciality) of man. A خصوصية is something whose absence causes the item to which it is attributed to perish. Hence, if تعليم is a خصوصية of man, it is essential for man's existence in the world. However, what this means is that without تعليم man will cease being man.

Madaaris and Man's Worldly Existence

So then can we imagine the consequences if there were no makaatib, madaaris and dar-ul-ulooms in the world? Among the objectives of such institutes is the preservation of Islam, the Qur'aan and the Sunnah. Allah willing, Islam will remain alive so long as we maintain such institutes. Today we have learnt something new; that the most important contribution of such institutes is the preservation of man, to ensure that man remains man.

و آخر دعوانا أن الحمد لله رب العالمين

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