

Scientific Interpretations of Quranic Verses regarding Protection of Nature

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Received: August 3, 2017

Accepted: October 22, 2017

ABSTRACT

Nature is considered in Islam as not the self-sustaining entity controlled by blind physical forces but rather a created being governed by God. It is considered as a sacred trust from His creator which demands responsible attitude from man. As nature is full of God's signs (Ayat), so it has a spiritual value full of meaning and purpose. The Quran deems man as custodian over the created order. The subjugation of nature (Taskher) does not mean domination or exploitation of nature. On the other hand, it means living in harmony with nature revering life in all its forms, seeing earth as a whole alive and nature as supreme expression of God's wisdom. Therefore, a Muslim's relation to nature is to acknowledge the wisdom of God everywhere and to care for His noble creation as He cares for us and for His creation Himself. This paper seeks to deal with interpretations of the basic ideas of the Quran regarding nature and its protection and caring of all the species of animals and plants for the balanced ecosystem. Viewpoints of modern and traditional scholars are given to endorse the idea.

KEY WORDS: Nature protection, interpretations, Ecological crisis, Quran, Science, vicegerent, sacred

INTRODUCTION

The basic concept of perception of nature as created by God or as self-originating entity shapes the attitude of people towards nature. If nature is understood as created only to serve human beings and considered lifeless, exploitation of nature without any limitation is the outcome. On the contrary, if nature is understood as having its own value, full of diverse and beautiful life, all glorifying its Creator, then it may command respect and careful use. This is the time for change in our perception of nature.

The holy Quran regards nature as full of signs of Allah. All things in it from sub-atomic particles to huge galaxies are deemed as creation of a Creator, so they are not separate from God. Each and everything according to the Quran is glorifying almighty Creator. So protection of nature and all things (plants and animals) in it means protection of signs of Allah. In this paper we will focus the nature as full of signs of Allah all glorifying him, so its protection is a sacred duty of Man. Followings are few points which endorse our viewpoint that Nature is full of Signs of Allah so needs judicious use.

1- World created by God: According to Islamic teachings there is a definite relationship between God and His creation. The core belief in the oneness of God (*Tawheed*) recognizes the fact that there is one absolute Creator of the whole cosmos and that man is accountable to Him for his actions. The holy Qur'an says:

"To God belongs all that is in the heavens and in the earth, for God encompasses everything" [1].

Therefore abusing his creations, whether it is a living being or a natural resource is a grave sin. *Tawhid* affirms the wholeness and holiness of the creation and thus it brings value to creation.

According to the Qur'an, inhabitants of the heavens and the earth – animals, plants, hills, the sun, the moon, the stars, and the great number among mankind – praise Allah [2]. "There is nothing, but celebrates His praises" [3]. Thus the whole creation is regarded alive and "to destroy any species or for that matter creatures in general without reason condoned by God is to destroy voices that reach God in hymning His praise"[4]. They perfectly obey the will of God and behave in accordance with the laws established by Him. But today in materialistic and secularistic perspective, nature is treated as a dead object meant to serve human beings. This attitude justifies exploitation and domination of nature.

2- Signs of God in the Cosmos: According to the Qur'an the world is full of signs (*ayat*) of God. The creation of heavens and earth, phenomena of nature and plants and animals, all are considered as the *Ayat* [5]. The Quranic word

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ayah means a sign or a mark by which a person or thing is known or can be perceived. The word *ayah* is used about four hundred times in the Qur'an [6] and along with its own verses, every creature of the nature is referred to as *ayah* of God [7]. This meaning of *ayat* is relevant here because if nature (with all its creatures) is *ayah* of God, then those who perceive it perceive God. The Qur'an also says, that all things have their origin by the command of God, "Be" (*kun*) [8]. God's commands are the expression of His will, plan and intention and so it is part of His being. It implies that creation is originated not in accident but by the definite will of God. He never created anything in vain or in "play" but with a serious purpose (*haqq*) [9]. A famous tradition of the prophet Muhammad (blessings of God be upon him) also affirms this fact in which God says: "I was a hidden treasure but was not known, loved to be known, I created the creatures that I be known to them" [10]. It brings value and importance to all forms of creation and negates the superiority or importance of one species over the other.

3-Allah as the Real Environment: The Holy Qur'an begins with the verse: "All praise be to Allah, the Sustainer of all the worlds" [11]. The Sustainer of all the worlds, may be read as all the environments. Sustainer of the worlds embraces and encompasses all environments. The Qur'an describes this truth as follows:

"To God belong the East and the West; wherever you turn, there is God's countenance. For God is All-Embracing, All-Knowing" [12].

Muhit is a beautiful name of God which means all encompassing, all pervading, and that which surrounds all [13]. This word in Arabic is also used to denote 'environment'. So in an even deeper sense, in Islamic perspective it can be claimed that God Himself is the ultimate environment which surrounds and encompasses man. Seyyed H. Nasr believes: 'The environmental crisis may in fact be said to have been caused by man's refusal to see God as the real 'environment' which surrounds man and nourishes his life. The destruction of the environment is the result of modern man's attempt to view natural environment as an ontologically independent order of reality, divorced from the Divine Environment without whose liberating grace it becomes stifled and dies. To remember God as *al-Muhit* is to remain aware of the sacred quality of nature, the reality of natural phenomena as signs (*ayat*) of God" [14].

4- Human beings as *Khalifa* of Allah: Man is titled in the Qur'an as vicegerent (*khalifa*) of God not in the sense that he replaces God. He is vicegerent because God subjected everything to him and gifted to him free will, knowledge and power to choose. These gifts make human beings responsible towards other creatures. This power and responsibility of human beings is termed vicegerency on behalf of God and implies the careful use of things but not their exploitation. As *khalifa*, human beings are not owners of creation, God is the owner and everything belongs to Him. Human beings are God's vicegerents and God's servants. Human beings should use their authority as *khalifa* within the limit of the servants of God. Human vicegerency needs to be interpreted in relation to the sovereignty of God, not independently. Seyyed H. Nasr rightly observes:

"If we do not fulfill that function, then we are not God's vicegerent on earth; rather we are trying ourselves to take the place of God. Having forgotten their vicegerency, today men are trying to act as gods, and they will be punished in the most severe way for this sin...however powerful we may appear to be as we try to destroy nature, nature will have the final say. Nature has direct contact with God; it is not responsible for us or to us. It is we who are responsible for its protection....we must try to preserve the harmony of nature instead of destroying it" [15].

5-Nature as Trust: In the Quranic view, nature belongs to Allah and it has been given to man merely as a trust (*Amanah*). Nature constitutes a testing-ground for man's morality and whatever right man possesses to have dominion over nature is solely due to his make-up and solidly derives from God's trust in His deputy and vicegerent on earth [16].

It recognizes the fact that there is one absolute Creator and that man is responsible to Him for all his actions.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessing be upon him) considered all of God's creations to be equal before God and he granted rights not only to animals, but also to land, forests and water courses [17].

The Qur'an commands us to eat and drink, but waste not by excess, for God loves not the wasters [18]. And do not waste (God's bounties): verily, He does not love the wasteful! [19].

God says in the Qur'an: We cause pure water to descend from the skies [20].

Scientifically the rain water is the purest of all types of water present in nature. It is man who pollute that purest form by polluting atmosphere, lithosphere and hydrosphere [21].

God's Messenger (peace be upon him) attached great importance to water, and forbade the excessive use of it even when taking the ablutions in a flowing river [22]. The Prophet (PBUH) also forbade polluting moving or stagnant bodies of water by urinating in it or bathing in it [23], or throwing faeces or other types of dirt in it. From this, by analogy, one can draw inference that putting sewerage and factory outpours (having toxic fatal chemicals and other

hazardous elements) to fresh or marine water should be forbidden at priority basis as their harm is greater than individual acts.

As a whole Islam considers nature and natural resources including plants, animals and all living things as trust and signs of God. This is evident from sayings and practice of the holy Prophet. The Prophet Muhammad emphatically instructed Muslims to spare and protect trees, crops, vegetation and animals even in the frenzy of war[24] .

Highlighting the importance of planting trees, he said: even if one sees the Hour coming, he should plant the sapling which is in his hand [25].

On migrating to Madina, God's Messenger (peace and blessing be upon him) organized the planting of trees and of date groves. He made the forests and green spaces conservation areas, where different living creatures lived. These were called sanctuaries (*hima*). For example, a strip of land approximately twelve miles wide around Madina was proclaimed a sanctuary and made a conservation area. We know that he declared many other areas sanctuaries as well [26].

Conclusions: At the end we can summarize that God made earth as garden having all types of bounties, diversity of life– flora and fauna – , balanced global ecosystem. God is the Supreme Creator and the Owner of that garden and Man can be taken, by analogy, the gardener and guardian. The Creator's supreme attribute is being Merciful and has commanded his gardener and vicegerent to be merciful to the rest of creation.

But the guardian has turned into a robber and is robbing earth not only of its beauty but the very resources that sustain all forms of life .Specially with the so called march of progress from agrarian to industrial/ post-industrial society man has proved himself negligent of and arrogant and reckless towards the natural garden. Not surprisingly, the garden is now on the verge of devastation and degrading into a wasteland. The Creator of the nature warns:

“Corruption has appeared on land and in the seas, an outcome of people's misdeeds; and so He let them taste (evil of) some of their deeds, so that they might return”[27].

As the creator is merciful and His mercy has taken precedence over His wrath, so evil of some of our deeds we are testing is not His wrath but also a manifestation of His cosmic mercy, so the humans may return and desist from corrupting and polluting the earth – the natural garden– before reaching point of no return. We must listen to the call of the Creator of the worlds and the sole Sustainer of the cosmic order if we wish to continue our sojourn on earth .The choice is ours. The leading French Philosopher Jacques Ellul has put it succinctly :

“Despite the choices still possible and the options still available, despite the path still open to be taken , despite all the warnings of the prophets and sentries, despite the outcries of the poets and the weak, this blindness is now leading men to will... their own destruction”[28].

We all, from the East, the West, the North and the South, from all disciplines and from all races and religions , have to focus on the global environmental crisis within and without before the collapse of our beautiful ecological system.

Almighty Merciful Creator shows us the path of deliverance from existing perilous and dreadful condition. According to the Qur'an a promise was made to Adam and Eve (and by implication to their progeny)when they were commanded to go down to the earthy garden, leaving heavenly garden, in the following words:

“Get ye down all together; and if, as is sure, there comes to you Guidance from Me, whosoever follows My Guidance, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve”[29].

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