

An Examination of the Linguistic Contextual Elements of *al-Ikmāl* Verse in Determining the Meaning of *al-Yawm*

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Abstract

Linguistic context plays such a significant role in the analysis and discovery of meaning that many linguists believe that meaning is discovered only through context. The present study examines the *al-Ikmāl* verse (Quran 5:3), an extremely prominent verse of the Holy Quran which has been the subject of debate between Shiites and Sunnis throughout history. The main dispute is about the meaning of the term *al-yawm*, which in the linguistic context of the verse is connected with different concepts such as the despair of infidels, the perfection of religion, completion of blessings, and God's pleasure. Due to these connections, exegetes' opinions on the meaning of *al-yawm* are completely influenced by their views of these concepts. Examining various hypotheses about the meaning of *al-yawm* and evaluating them based on other elements of the verse's linguistic context demonstrate that *al-yawm* in *al-Ikmāl* Verse can only refer to the day of Ghadīr Khum (Dhu al-Hijjah 18).

Keywords: Linguistic context, sura al-Mā'ida, al-Ikmāl Verse, Event of Ghadīr Khum, al-yawm.

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Introduction

Although Shiites and Sunnis agree on some issues regarding *al-Ikmāl* Verse (the Verse of Perfection) (Quran 5:3), they disagree over the phrase "Today the faithless have despaired of your religion. So do not fear them, but fear Me. Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed My blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam as your religion," which speaks of the perfection of religion, the completion of blessings and God's pleasure. This difference has given rise to wide-ranging theological debates between the two sects throughout Islamic history. Their main point of disagreement seems to be the meaning of the term *al-yawm* (the day or today). Therefore, in the work of Shiite and Sunni scholars, there are points of agreement concerning the interpretation of the above phrase, which will be explained in the following pages. Then various hypotheses about the meaning of *al-yawm* will be discussed and evaluated based on other elements of the phrase's linguistic context. At the end, the problem of no contextual connection between the phrase in question and its preceding and following phrases will be examined.

Points of Agreement between Shiite and Sunni Exegetes

1. Sura al-Mā'ida (Quran 5) as one of the last revealed suras:

There is a consensus between the two sects that Sura al-Mā'ida (Quran 5), in which al-Ikmāl Verse occurs, is one of the last revealed suras in Medina (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1970, 5:157). In addition, scholars such as Zarkashī (1392) have adduced 'Ā'isha's (678) words to suggest that it might even be *the* last revealed sura (Zarkashī 1990, 1:297). It is also stated in Shiite and Sunni narrations that there are abrogating (*nāsikh*) verses in Sura al-Mā'ida but no abrogated (*mansūkh*) ones, because nothing was revealed after Sura al-Mā'ida to abrogate any of its verses, which implies that it was one of the last revealed suras ('Ayyāshī 1961, 1:288; Ibn Kathīr 1998, 3:3).

2. Revelation of al-Ikmāl Verse in the farewell pilgrimage:

According to both sects, *al-Ikmāl* Verse was revealed during the farewell pilgrimage. There is no disagreement in this regard (Ṭabarī 1992, 6:54; Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1970, 5:189).

3. Co-reference of both uses of *al-yawm* in the verse:

Shiite and Sunni scholars agree that both uses of the term *al-yawm*, one of which denotes the time of the despair of infidels and the other denotes

the time of perfection of religion, completion of blessings and God's pleasure, refer to the same day or period of time (See Najjārzādīgān 2013, 180).

Hypotheses about the Meaning of “al-Yawm”

Since the verse does not explicitly specify the meaning of the term *al-yawm*", it is absolutely necessary to refer to relevant narrations in order to determine its meaning. As different occasions are narrated, in the following, they are presented as hypotheses and examined one by one.

First Hypothesis: The day on which the rulings in the verse concerning permissible and forbidden meats were revealed

Some people believe that since the term *al-yawm* is preceded by rulings of forbidden foods, within a single verse, *al-yawm* means the day on which the rulings about permissible and forbidden meats were revealed (Zamakhsharī 1987, 1:605; Bayḍāwī 1997, 2:115).

Critique

1. These are not the last rulings revealed to the Prophet (s), for there are other rulings later in the Sura. Therefore, it is not true to say that the religion became perfect at that time, while there were other rulings that were not revealed yet. There are numerous narrations to the effect that some rulings were revealed after Sura al-Mā'ida, and these narrations are too many to be ignored. For example, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (644) is quoted as saying: “The last revealed verse of the Quran was the verse of usury” (Quran 2:278) (Tha‘ālabī 1997, 1:544). Furthermore, in his book *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Bukhārī (870) quotes Ibn ‘Abbās as saying that: “The last verse revealed to the Messenger of God (s) was the verse of usury” (Bukhārī 1987, 2:909).
2. It is not true to claim that these rulings perfected the religion, since the revelation of such rulings was not important enough to perfect the religion.
3. The revelation of these rulings would not cause the despair of the infidels. What caused their despair was a strong support for the future of Islam. In other words, the revelation of such rulings could not discourage disbelievers. Why would it matter to them whether the

meat is forbidden or permissible (Makārim Shīrāzī 1993, 4:263-264).

4. On this hypothesis, who does the expression "the faithless" refer to? It cannot refer to the Arab infidels, since they had already disappeared at the time. Indeed, Islam had removed polytheism from the Arab society in the ninth year after the Hijra. So, there was no longer a person who practiced polytheism. And it cannot refer to non-Arab infidels from other nations and races, since they were not still disappointed about the victory over Islam.

Second Hypothesis: Day of ‘Arafa, the ninth day of the month of *Dhu al-Hijjah*, in the last pilgrimage of the Prophet (s) to Mecca (*Hajjat al-Widā* ‘)

There are narrations based on which a few Quranic exegetes believe that "*al-yawm*" refers to the day of ‘Arafa during the last pilgrimage of the Prophet (s) to Mecca (see Suyūṭī 1984, 2:257-259). And regarding the relationship between the day of ‘Arafah and the perfection of religion, one might say that the affairs of hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, were completed on that day, because the Messenger of God (s) himself attended that ceremony and stated the rulings of hajj, one by one, implementing them himself.

Critique

1. One might ask: What would it then mean for the infidels to despair on that particular day? Would it mean that Quraysh polytheists were disappointed of being able to destroy Islam? Obviously, this cannot be accepted because the Arab polytheists were disappointed two years back, after the conquest of Mecca, which took place in the eighth year after the Hijra, not on the day of ‘Arafa in the farewell pilgrimage to Mecca in the tenth year after the Hijra.
2. Teaching the hajj rituals alone cannot be considered the perfection of Islam. Since hajj (Quran 3:97), as well as other rulings such as prayer, fasting, zakat and jihad were already commanded (see Amīn 2012), a detailed articulation of the rulings of Hajj alone could not lead to the perfection of Islam.
3. The teaching of a ruling of a religion as the perfection of that religion cannot be the perfection of that ruling, let alone that of the whole religion.
4. Besides, this account renders the two sentences "Today the faithless

have despaired of your religion" and "Today I have perfected your religion for you" irrelevant to each other.

Third Hypothesis: The day of the Conquest of Mecca

Since on the day of the Conquest of Mecca, plots of the polytheists were frustrated, their glory destroyed, the foundation of their religion ruined, their idols broken and their hope to prevent the spread of Islam shattered, some have proposed that *al-yawm* refers to the day of the Conquest of Mecca (Qurṭubī 1986, 6:60).

Critique

1. The verse indicates the perfection of the religion. However, we know that immediately after the Conquest of Mecca, the religion was not perfect and God's blessings were not over. This was because the Conquest of Mecca took place in the eighth year after the Hijra and many religious rulings were revealed afterwards (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1970, 5:169).
2. The sentence "Those who disbelieve" includes all Arab polytheists, while in the Conquest of Mecca, only some of them were disappointed of attaining a victory over Islam. The reason for this is the covenants and treaties that were still considered valid and binding against the Muslims after the Conquest of Mecca. Another evidence that they were not still disappointed after the conquest is that Arab polytheists continued to perform Hajj in keeping with pre-Islamic rituals; for instance, stark naked women performed *Ṭawāf* (circumambulation around the *Ka'ba* for seven times) until the Messenger of God (s) sent (630) the Imam 'Alī (a) to Mecca with the verses of Sura al-Barā'a, by which he abolished the remaining customs of the "ignorance era" (ibid).

Fourth Hypothesis: The Day when Sura al-Barā'a was Revealed

When Islam spread over almost the entire Arabian Peninsula, traces of polytheism disappeared, the traditions of ignorance era died, Muslims did not see any polytheists on ritual occasions, including the rituals of Hajj, people no longer considered anything as a partner of God, and Almighty God turned the fear and anxiety of Muslims into security (Ṭabarī 1992, 6:52).

Critique

Although, after the revelation of Sura Barā'a and the dismantling of polytheism, Arab polytheists were disappointed with the victory over Islam, and the customs of the ignorance era disappeared, Islam was not perfect yet. Because a number of commands and rulings were revealed after Sura al-Barā'a (9 AH), including the rulings in Sura al-Mā'ida which Quranic exegetes agree that were revealed at the end of the Prophet's life in 10 AH (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1970, 5:169). Therefore, since many rulings concerning forbiddance or permissibility were revealed in Sura al-Mā'ida, the above hypothesis is not acceptable.

The Espoused Hypothesis: The Day of Ghadīr Khum (Dhu al-Hajjah 18).

This is the day on which the Prophet (s) introduced Imam 'Alī (s) as his successor and people's guardian upon his return from *Hajjat al-Widā'* (the Farewell Hajj) at a place called Ghadīr Khum, where everyone, including the most prominent companions of the Prophet, pledged their allegiance with Imam 'Alī (s) (Baḥrānī 1995, 2:243-244). This was in compliance with the divine command in al-Tablīgh Verse (the Verse of Propagation) (Quran 5:67). The following are reasons in favor of this account:

- 1) This was the day when the infidels were extremely disappointed, because they expected that Islam would rely only upon the Prophet (s), and with his demise, everything could be back to normal and Islam would begin to disappear. They were disappointed, however, when they saw that a unique, competent, and powerful man was appointed as the Prophet's successor and people pledged their allegiance to him.
- 2) On this day, Islam reached its perfection, because without appointing a successor to the Prophet (s) and without clarifying the future of Muslims, this religion would not have reached its final development.
- 3) It was the time when the blessing of God was completed by appointing 'Alī (s) as the qualified leader for people in the future.
- 4) On this day, Islam was accepted by God as the final religion, because His satisfaction with Islam could be achieved only after its completion.

This hypothesis is accordingly consistent with the four elements of this verse's linguistic context; namely, the despair of infidels, perfection of the

religion, completion of God's blessings, and God's satisfaction with Islam. In addition to the above arguments, the following evidence also reinforces this possibility:

- 1) It is quoted that the Prophet (s) only lived for eighty-one days after the revelation of this verse (Fakhr Rāzī 1999, 11:288). And considering that the Prophet's death in Sunni and even some Shiite hadith sources (e.g., Kulaynī 1987, 1:439) was on Rabi' al-Awwal 12, it is concluded that the date of the revelation of Al-Ikmāl Verse was Dhu al-Hijjah 18. Of course, this can be true if we do not take into calculation the day of the Prophet's demise and the day of Ghadīr (Dhu al-Hajjah 18), and take the relevant three months to be 29-day months, which is quite possible. Given that during the days before and after the day of Ghadīr no significant event occurred in the history of Islam, the date of the revelation of al-Ikmāl Verse can only match Dhu al-Hijjah 18 (Makārim Shīrāzī 1993, 4:265).
- 2) In his book, *Manāqib 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib*, Ibn Mardawayh quotes Abū Sa'īd Khudrī as saying that in Ghadīr Khum the Prophet (s) introduced 'Ali (s) as a guardian of people and they had not still left the place when al-Ikmāl Verse was revealed. At the time, the Prophet (s) said:

God is the greatest over the perfection of the religion, the completion of the blessings and His satisfaction with my mission and 'Ali's guardianship after me. Whoever I am his master 'Alī (s) is his master too. God! Love the one who loves him, take as enemy the one who takes him an enemy, help him who helps him, and forsake him who stops helping him (Ibn Mardawayh 2003, 232-233).
- 3) According to al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, Abū Hurayra quoted the Prophet (s) as saying that: "Al-Ikmāl Verse was revealed after the event of Ghadīr Khum and the covenant of the guardianship of 'Alī (s), when 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb told 'Alī (s): "Congratulations to you, 'Alī! You became my master and the master of every Muslim" (Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī 2001, 1:222).
- 4) In *al-Burhān* and *Nūr al-thaqalayn*, two Quranic exegeses, ten narrations are cited through different chains of transmission, all stating that this verse was revealed about 'Ali (s) or the day of Ghadīr Khum. (See Baḥrānī 1995, 2:224-247; Ḥuwayzī 1995, 1:587-590).

- 5) ‘Allāma Sayyid Sharaf al-Dīn says in his book, *al-Murāja‘āt*:

The revelation of *al-Ikmāl* Verse on the day of Ghadīr Khum is mentioned in authentic narrations from Imam Bāqir (s) and Imam Ṣādiq (s). Moreover, the Sunnis have cited six hadiths through different chains of transmission from the Prophet (s) which explicitly state that the verse was revealed about the event of Ghadīr Khum (Sharaf al-Dīn 1992, 110)

As a result, the narrations according to which the date of the revelation of *al-Ikmāl* Verse was the day are not cases of *al-khabār al-wāḥid* (or “single-narrator reports”; that is, the ones whose number of transmitters in each generation of their transmission is not enough to yield certainty) that can be ignored by dismissing some of their transmitters as unreliable, but rather they are *al-khabār al-mutawātir* (or “frequently narrated reports,” that is, those that are reported by a sufficient number of narrators through various chains of transmission in a way that yields certainty) or at least *al-khabār al-mustafīd* (which include at least three narrators in each generation of their transmission).

The Problem of No Contextual Relation

The most important challenge for Shiites concerning *al-Ikmāl* Verse is the absence of any contextual relation between the phrase "Today the faithless have despaired of your religion. So do not fear them, but fear Me. Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed My blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam as your religion" and its preceding and following phrases. Hence, two objections have been raised as follows:

- 1) If the phrase "You are prohibited carrion, blood, the flesh of swine, and what has been offered to other than Allah, and the animal strangled or beaten to death, and that which dies by falling or is gored to death, and that which is mangled by a beast of prey barring that which you may purify and what is sacrificed on stone altars [to idols] and that you should divide by raffling with arrows. All that is transgression" at the beginning of the verse is attached to the phrase "But should anyone be compelled by hunger, without inclining to sin, then Allah is indeed all-forgiving, all-merciful" at the end of the verse, a meaningful self-sufficient statement is formed, which is irrelevant to the above-mentioned phrase concerning the event of Ghadīr Khum, because the preceding and following phrases are about permissible and forbidden meats. Why does the verse contain these apparently irrelevant phrases?

- 2) Given that *al-Ikmāl* and *al-Tablīgh* verses are both associated with the event of Ghadīr Khum, why is there a gap between them, the former being verse 3 and the latter being verse 67 of Sura al-Mā'ida (Quran 5)? (Muḥammad Rashīd 1994, 6:466-467).

Clarification

- 1) Quranic verses and suras were not collected and arranged according to the dates of their revelations. Many Medinan suras contain verses that were revealed in Mecca, and conversely, Medinan verses can be found in Meccan suras. Given this fact, the split between *al-Ikmāl* Verse and *al-Tablīgh* Verse should not surprise us, especially since the arrangement of verses in each sura was done only at the Prophet's command. Of course, the objection would be sustained if the verses were collected and arranged according to the dates of revelation.
- 2) Perhaps the phrase associated with the event of Ghadīr Khum was placed between the rulings concerning permissible and forbidden meats to protect it from distortion, alteration, and omission, because it often happens that a precious object is protected through a mixture with humble objects lest it attracts too much attention (Makārim Shīrāzī 1993, 4:270).

During the last hours of the Prophet's life, some of his companions explicitly opposed the writing of a will by the Prophet (s), accusing his holiness of being delirious and talking incoherently. This is cited in the prominent Islamic literature, including Sunni and Shiite books (see Ibn Ḥajjāj 2006, 2:772; 'Allāma Ḥillī 1982, 333-334). This suggests that the stake of caliphate or the succession of the Prophet (s) was high to some people, and hence, they could go all the way to the denial of 'Alī's appointment as the successor. Accordingly, this required precautions such as relocation of the relevant verses to protect the evidence regarding the caliphate and to convey them to future generations.

Consequently, as 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī holds the phrase "Today the faithless have despaired of your religion. So do not fear them, but fear Me. Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed My blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam as your religion" is a parenthetical statement. It is located in the middle of *al-Ikmāl* Verse and has no clear relation with the

beginning or end of the verse. It is not known whether it was placed between the preceding and following phrases by God from the very beginning of revelation, or the Messenger of God (s) commanded the scribes of the Quran to do so, or the scribes did it on their own (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1970, 5:167).

This view is confirmed by narrations about the occasion of the revelation of the verse, which mention only the phrase about Ghadīr Khum and do not refer to the rest of the verse. Accordingly, it might be said that the phrase has been revealed independently and separately from the other two phrases, and its placement in the middle of al-Ikmāl Verse was done either by the Messenger of God (s) or the scribes of the Quran.

Conclusion

The “day” mentioned in al-Ikmāl Verse must be a very important day in the history of Islam, not a simple ordinary day. Hence, there are narrations to the effect that some Jews and Christians said, upon hearing this verse, that if there was such a verse in our scriptures, we would celebrate it as a holy day (Wāḥidī 2004, 100). On the other hand, the despair of the infidels must have been due to a factor that ruled out the possibility of their victory over the Muslims in the future: that God appointed someone for preserving Islam, who was the deputy of the Messenger of God (s). In fact, as long as a religion depends only on one person, its enemies can entertain its disappearance once that person is gone. But when a religion relies on a continuous legal personality, instead of a real one, it reaches perfection and stability. The intended meaning of the term *al-yawm* in al-Ikmāl Verse is therefore the day of Ghadīr Khum (Dhu al-Hijjah 18), on which ‘Ali (s) was appointed and introduced as the successor and caliph of the Messenger of God (s).

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