

## The Concept of God as Light according to Imami Exegetes

Ali Andideh<sup>1</sup>  
Ali Rad<sup>2</sup>

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### Abstract

There are various aspects to the matter of God as light and, therefore, it is difficult to explain Quranic verses in this regard. In Quran 24:35, God is equated to light. This verse counts as a difficult verse of the Qur'an due to the delicacy and subtlety of the topic, the supra-rationality of God, and the fact that the Quranic verse is ambiguous (*mutashābih*). Since light is a creation of God, how might God be compared to a creation? This question has sparked a variety of explanations for this verse. The ongoing development of ideas concerning this verse as well as the puzzle of God's comparison to light require an examination of the issue in greater detail. The present study examines and evaluates the historical evolution of Imami approaches to the topic. It also provides a comprehensive theory inclusive of the previous views and in keeping with the context, exegetical narratives, and the meaning of light.

**Keywords:** comparison of God, God as light, Imami exegesis.

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1. Assistant Professor at Persian Gulf University, Bushehr, Iran. andideh@pgu.ac.ir

2. Associate Professor, University of Tehran (Farabi Campus), Qom, Iran.  
ali.rad@ut.ac.ir

### **Introduction**

According to Qur'an 24:35, "Allah is the light (*nūr*) of the heavens and the earth." Considering the meaning of the term *nūr*, this verse apparently compares God to his own creation, i.e. light. The word *nūr* is a non-derivative noun, and this is the only place in the Qur'an where God is described with this noun.

According to Arabic lexicons, the term *nūr* is that which allows the sightless to see and leads the lost toward guidance. Furthermore, it is something from which all manifestations issue. (Ibn al-Athīr 1364 Sh, 5:125; Ibn Manẓūr 1414 AH, 5:240; Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī 1376 Sh, 827). Ṭurayḥī defines *nūr* as a property that makes objects visible (Ṭurayḥī 1375 Sh, 504).

A semantic consideration of the term *nūr* shows that its basic meaning is that which is manifest itself and causes other things to become manifest as well or, in Arabic terms, *nūr* is *al-zāhir bi-nafsih wa al-muẓhir li-ghayrih* (lit. manifest per se and manifester of others). According to Fayḍ Kāshānī's semantic account, the reality (*ḥaqīqah*) of that which is a manifestation must necessarily be simple or uncompounded (*basīṭ*). *Nūr* means that which causes manifestation, and naturally, since the giver of something cannot lack what it gives, anything that makes other things visible must be visible itself. Initially, this term referred to a physical luminescent mass that made objects visible. Later on, as a metaphorical or secondary meaning, it was used to refer to anything that reveals perceptible things. Therefore, even the human senses were considered as *nūr* or as having *nūr* since they reveal perceptible things. Eventually, the term was broadened even further to include things imperceptible by the five senses as well. On this basis, reason is called *nūr* since it reveals intelligible things. All this is understood from the definition of *nūr* which, as previously stated, is manifest per se and manifester of

others. Accordingly, “Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth” means that God is manifest per se and is the manifester of the heavens and the earth (Fayḍ Kāshānī 1415 AH, 3:434).

The term *nūr* also means the quality of being pure and beyond all faults. In other words, the basis of *nūr* is purity. An example of this usage is *imra`at al-nūr* and *nisā` al-nawwār* (luminous women) which refers to women who are free of dubiety and depravity (Rāzī 1408 AH, 7:250).

Considering the semantics of the term *nūr*, what is the meaning of God as light? How can this concept be applied to God? Can God be called *nūr*? Why has God Almighty compared Himself to light, which is His own creation? Is it truly a comparison at all? How have the views of Imami exegetes on this issue evolved over time? The theories of Imami exegetes concerning the Verse of Light are discussed below in light of the above questions.

### 1. The Narrative – Literary Approach

Numerous early Imami exegetes up to the 5th/11th and 6th/12th centuries as well as some recent exegetes have attempted to provide literary analyses of *nūr* under the influence of narratives from Infallibles (a) and Companions. These theories can be categorised as follows.

**Hādī (Guide):** On this account, the light of the heavens and the earth means the guide of the inhabitants of the heavens and the earth. In other words, these inhabitants are guided toward the truth by the lights of God the Glorious. Through the light of His guidance, they are freed of the darkness of error and misery. This interpretation is attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās (Muqātil 1423 AH, 3:199).

**Munawwīr (Illuminator):** In this verse, *nūr* is a verbal noun (*maṣḍar*) that is used in lieu of the active participle (*ism fā`il*). As per

this idea, “*nūr al-samāwāt wa al-arḍ*” in this verse means that God has illuminated the heavens and the earth using the light of the sun, the moon, and the stars (Ṭūsī 1372 Sh, 7:437) or the angels and prophets (Shubbar 1412 AH, 342). This theory is supported by a reading (*qirā’ah*) of the Quran attributed to Amīr al-Mu’minīn (a), that is, *nawwar* instead of *nūr*, which is a past tense verb from the *taf’īl* form.

**Muzayyin (Adorning):** Some exegetes believe that “*nūr al-samāwāt wa al-arḍ*” means “*muzayyin al-samāwāt wa al-arḍ*.” In other words, it means that God Almighty has adorned the heavens and the earth with angels, the sun, the moon, the stars, the prophets, the faithful, and scholars (Ṭabrisī, n.d., 17:139).

**Mudabbir (Director):** The meaning of God as the light of the heavens and the earth is that God the Glorious directs and governs the world (Shubbar 1412 AH, 342). In His immense wisdom, regulates and manages the affairs of the world. Exegetes attribute this view to Mujāhid.

**Ṣāhib (Owner):** “Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth” means that God owns the light in the heavens and the earth (Kāshānī 1423 AH, 4:508-9). To state matters differently, God illuminates the world for the benefit of His servants and everything that utilises light through the stars or the angels and the prophets.

With reference to the literal meaning of *nūr*, some scholars are of the opinion that the verse indicates that God Almighty is free of all faults (Rāzī 1408 AH, 7:250). Alternatively, considering the nature of light, as an insubstantial and luminous entity subject to origination (*hudūth*), e.g. rise and fall, it is improper to describe God using the literal sense of light. However, it can be used as a metaphorical description. In this way, *nūr* would refer to *munawwir* (Jurjānī 1377 Sh, 6:313).

## 2. The Narrative Approach

A second group of exegetes have provided an interpretation of the beginning of the Verse of Light based on the literal sense of the term *nūr* while remaining consistent with the verse “There is nothing like unto Him” (42:11). Therefore, it does not involve anthropomorphism or comparison of God to physical light. Light is considered an agent that makes vision possible originating from light sources and reflecting from created material barriers. The problem in this verse arises from the multiplicity of the meanings for the term *nūr*. By taking the core meaning of the term into account, the problems of comparison of God to physical light and the anthropomorphism of God are resolved. Thus, the meaning of the verse is different from the conventional understanding that initially comes to mind. Imam Ṣādiq (a) has stated, “Such is Allah” (‘Arūsī al-Ḥuwayzī 1415 AH, 3:603; Baḥrānī 1416 AH, 4:68). In a narrative attributed to Imam ‘Alī (a) based on non-Shia sources, he recited this verse as “*Allāh nūr al-samāwāt wa al-arḍ ‘alā al-fi’l*” (God is the light of the heavens and earth in action) (Tha‘labī 1422 Ah, 7:101).

As stated previously, in its core meaning, *nūr* refers to that which is manifest per se and manifests other things. In other words, God Almighty gives existence to all beings. In accordance with the statement of the Imam, “Such is Allah,” God the Glorious is the epitome of *nūr*. Creatorship is one of God’s attributes of action, and the statement by Imam ‘Alī (a), “*‘alā al-fi’l*,” (lit. in action) refers to this. In another narrative, Imam Bāqir (a) states, “*Bada’ bi-nūr nafsih ta’ālā*” (God the Exalted manifested Himself with His own light) and then – in response to the question “*Mithl nūr al-rabb?*” (Like the light of the Lord?) – the Imam declares, “*Subḥān Allāh, lays li-Allāh mithl. Qāl Allāh: falā taḍribū li-Allāh al-amthāl*” (Far removed from imperfections is Allāh. There is nothing like God. God has declared:

“So do not make analogies for Allah” (16:74) (Qummī 1367 Sh, 2:103). This narrative corroborates the general meaning of the term *nūr*, and rejects the comparison of God Almighty to creations, specifically in the case of physical light.

### 3. The Text-Based Approach

To have an accurate understanding of Quranic terms in question, it is necessary to consider all elements of their meanings by reference to reliable lexicons. Furthermore, one must not rely on the first meaning that comes to mind for Quranic words. In the holy Quran, many words are utilized in numerous literal and figurative senses. For these words, the true meaning is determined using a variety of clues. Therefore, in addition to having knowledge of all meanings, it is important to make use of existing clues to understand the intended meaning. One such clue is context.

The use of context for determining the meaning is a basic principle of speech in all languages. Exegetes and scholars of Quranic sciences insist on the significance of context in understanding Quranic verses. Zarkashī points out that consideration of the meaning of each word in a verse as well as their use in the context of verses is the only path to understanding parts of the Quran that are not associated with reliable exegetical narratives (Zarkashī 1410 AH, 2:313). In *Tafsīr al-Manār*, Rashīd Riḍā writes that, without a doubt, the greatest clue for determining the true meaning of a term is its correspondence with previous parts of the text as well as the entirety of the meaning (Rashīd Riḍā, n.d., 1:22). For ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī, the sense of the context of Quranic verses outweighs the apparent meaning of narratives. In cases where the apparent meaning of a narrative conflicts with the context of a verse, ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī interprets away the apparent meaning of the narrative to make it compatible with

the context of the relevant verse (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1417 AH, 17:7-9). In the evolution of the ideas of Shia exegetes, the text-based approach not only considers the meaning of the term *nūr*, but also the context. Therefore, it provides a complete meaning in line with Quranic verses and narratives as well as the literal and technical meanings of *nūr*. In this way, ambiguities in meanings provided by the first and second groups of exegetes are resolved and the balance is achieved among the meanings provided.

### 3.1. Context of the Verse

The concept of guidance is introduced in the Verse of Light: “Allah guides to His light whom He wills.” This shows that the meaning of the term *nūr* beside the heavens and the earth is existential guidance (*al-hidāyat al-takwīniyya*). In another verse, the Quran states, “Allah will perfect His light” (61:8). This may be an allusion that God is the only entity that guides creation toward the correct path, manages its affairs, and preserves its balance (Faḍl Allāh 1419 AH, 16:332). Since the manifestation of all things is dependent upon the existence of God Almighty, the Divine Essence, which is the source of existence, is already manifest. Additionally, since the existence of other entities is dependent upon acts of creation by God – i.e., God creates objects, which then become manifest and visible to one another – He is the manifester of all things. Furthermore, God Almighty states, “every moment He is in a state” (55:29). Hence, every moment the divine light has a new state of grace, and all beings are ultimately dependent upon the divine light. It follows that the Divine Essence involves an all-embracing light and the illumination of the heavens, the earth, and all other beings as a state of this universal light.

### 3.2. Context of the Word

In numerous instances in the holy Quran, a single word is used in a variety of verses, but in each case the context provides a particular meaning. One such word is *nūr*. The holy Quran has used this term for various things including the following:

Tangible worldly light such as the light of day as in “He made the darkness and the light” (6:1) and the light of the moon as in “He made the moon therein a [reflected] light” (71:16); rational worldly life which includes divine affairs that can be seen through insight, such as the Qur’an, as in “There has come to you from Allah a light and a clear Book” (5:15); reason, as in “We made for him light by which to walk among the people” (6:122); divine guidance, which illuminates the path for the faithful and guides them toward paradise, as in “Allah will not disgrace the Prophet and those who believed with him. Their light will proceed before them and on their right” (66:8); faith, as in “Allah is the ally of those who believe. He brings them out from darkness into the light.” (2:257); the religion of Islam, as in “They want to extinguish the light of Allah with their mouths, but Allah refuses except to perfect His light, although the disbelievers dislike it.” (9:32); and the holy Prophet (ﷺ), as in “And one who invites to Allah, by His permission, and an illuminating lamp” (33:46).

All these have received their existence and manifestation from the source of light, and all fall in the circle of the universal mercy (*rahmat al-‘āmmah*). The God that created the entire existence illuminates it as well. The existence of all beings is dependent upon His will, and it is His blessing that keeps them in existence. If He denies them His favour for even a moment, the whole existence will cease to be (Makārim Shīrāzī 1374 Sh, 14:475). If God terminates the emanation (*fayḍ*) of existence, absolute darkness will reign. The *nūr* in question



here is a contingent being that provides the world with light and also provides physical light with luminescence.

#### 4. The All-Encompassing Mercy or Light of God

The verse in question cannot be considered separate from previous verses. Its preceding verses, concerned with religious decrees, end with the verse, “And We have certainly sent down to you illuminating signs/verses (*āyāt*) and examples from those who passed on before you and an admonition for those who fear Allah” (24:34). These verses speak of *bayān*, which seems to refer to demonstration of the true knowledge. In other words, it refers to divine enlightenment. In addition, the word *āyāt* is mentioned in the verse above. Quranic verses are themselves described as *nūr* in several places of the Quran including “We have sent down to you a clear light.” (4:174). Thus, these verses compare the faithful, who have true faith, with the disbelievers. The faithful are blessed with guidance through their good deeds and a light from their Lord whereas the deeds of disbelievers will only lead them toward mirages lacking any kind of truth.

This truth can be stated thus: God Almighty is an all-encompassing light that illuminates the heavens and the earth. Through this light, truths are manifested in the world of existence. If manifestation of something is dependent upon another, the other entity must be manifest per se. This is the only light in existence that is manifest in and of itself and manifests others. Thus, God the Exalted is a light that illuminates the heavens and the earth. The manifestation of entities through divine light is tantamount to obtainment of existence. Of course, the manifestation of dense bodies (*jism al-kathīf*) through physical light is not the same as their obtainment of existence. Since contingent beings are dependent upon the act of creation by God Almighty, He is the epitome of *nūr*. He is manifest per se and

manifests all else. All beings obtain their manifestation and existence from Him. In this sense, *nūr* in “Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth” (24:35) is the all-encompassing light of God from which all of existence stems. It is a light that illuminates all things and is equivalent to the existence of all things. This is the meaning of universal divine mercy (Ṭabāṭabā’ī 1417 AH, 15:119). Therefore, by taking into account the context of previous verses concerned with true knowledge and the guidance of God and other Quranic verses concerned with light, and the basic meaning of the term, the term *nūr* in the verse in question might be said to have a comprehensive meaning, inclusive of all senses utilized in the Quran, traditions, and supplications as well as physical light. This is because the creation, manifestation, and survival of all of these are contingent upon this divine light. This comprehensive concept subsumes everything. Existence itself is a blessing of this light and genetic guidance is a ray of this light. This comprehensive concept is equivalent to universal divine mercy as discussed in “Our Lord is He who gave each thing its form and then guided [it].” (20:50).

### **Conclusion**

It is appropriate to apply the word *nūr* (light) to God Almighty since it is employed so by the Quran as well as the Imams (a). The basic meaning of the term *nūr*, in essence, is that which is manifest *per se* and manifests other things. The use of this term in the Verse of Light is not an analogy since the light in question is not the physical light that is a creation of God. Rather, it means that the Divine Essence is manifest and manifesting. Before God, all light is as darkness, and God has given light its luminescence. Every being has a share in this light. In the verse “Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth” (24:35), light refers to the all-encompassing light of God from which

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all of existence emanates. It is a light that illuminates all things and gives them their existence. Light in this sense is equivalent to the universal divine mercy. The creation and manifestation of the heavens and the earth, guidance, management, the Quran itself, and all other usages of the term *nūr* in the Quran, narratives, and supplications and even physical light are embodied within this comprehensive concept and fall under the concept of divine mercy.

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