

A Historical Analysis of the Quranic Concept of Lapidating Devils with Meteors ¹

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The Quranic concept of lapidating devils with meteors has received a variety of interpretations throughout Islamic history. In the past, it was interpreted to mean heavenly meteors thrown at devils in order to prevent them from giving ear to heavenly tidings. However, in the fourteenth century AH and as a result of modern scientific achievements, different non-literal interpretations were suggested. These interpretation and their place in the contemporary Quranic exegesis will be studied in this article.

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1. Statement of the Problem

In different verses, the Quran indicates that devils are lapidated with meteors so that they cannot listen to heavenly news (See Quran 15:16-

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18; 37:6-10; 72:8-9; 67:5). This has received a variety of interpretations throughout Islamic history: classical exegetes interpreted it literally, but modern commentators usually favour non-literal interpretations for it. The cause of this exegetical disagreement is that modern commentators have tried to adapt their interpretations to the findings of science, according to which, meteors are simply scattered stones around the earth's atmosphere. As these stones approach the gravity of the earth, they get increasingly drawn into the atmosphere; and upon entering it, they burn and form meteors (Najafi 2011, 136).

2. Literature Review

The discussions on the concept of lapidating devils with meteors are usually centred on the discord between this Quranic concept and science. Some commentators, such as Sayyid Qutb, believe that the literal meaning of the verses should not be forsaken in favour of human science, especially that lapidating devils with meteors is a metaphysical matter, which falls outside the realm of science. Others, such as Allamah Tabatabai, regard the literal meaning of the said verses to be incompatible with science, and interpret them figuratively. And still others, such as Misbah Yazdi, while agreeing with the use of science in the exegesis of the Quran, believe that a function of meteors is in fact to drive devils away from listening to heavenly news.

3. Lapidating Devils with Meteors in Babylonian Thought

The beliefs and conceptions of the Arabs before Islam were deeply influenced by the Babylonian/Chaldean planetary ideology. Chaldeans were known as the pioneers of astronomy. They were the first people who invented some elementary tools for observing the stars; they determined the place of stars, recognized constellations, and determined the position of the sun and moon. Some other ancient civilized nations, including Indians, Greeks, and Egyptians also borrowed the science of astronomy from Chaldeans. In the fifth century BC, Iranians dominated Chaldea and occupied its cities. Consequently, many Chaldeans escaped from their motherland and took refuge in the neighbouring countries, specifically the Arabian Peninsula. (Zaydan 2011, 403).

4. Lapidating Devils with Meteors in the Age of Ignorance

Among the Chaldeans who immigrated to Arabia, there were astronomers and magicians who taught Arabs astronomy and astrology, though there was some familiarity with Indian astronomy among the Arabs prior to that time. As time passed, Babylonian thought also influenced the Arab culture and belief system, and formed the foundation for the belief in the direct influence of the heavens and stars on human life. Arab sorcerers also added fuel to the fire, and after some time, sorcery became an essential part of the Arab astrological ideology in the Age of Ignorance (Zaydan 2011, 403).

Arab sorcerers usually informed people of future occurrences, interpreted dreams, remedied maladies, and resolved conflicts among the commons. There was a general belief that sorcerers were in contact with jinn, and managed to acquire heavenly information through these demons who could give ear to the heavens (Ali 2001, 12:334). Ibn Abbas is quoted as saying,

During the Age of Ignorance, there were some magicians who were accompanied by jinn. Those jinn ascended to the heavens and listened to heavenly tidings. Then, they descended to the earth and informed their companions of what they had heard. Sorcerers provided their audience with the collected tidings, which were either about the past or the future. After Prophet Muhammad [s] was chosen as the prophet of Islam, jinn were banned from their previous doings and the heavens became protected against their spying.

(Shami 1993, 108)

Some figures of the Age of Ignorance, such as A'waf ibn Jaza', Aws ibn Hajar, and Bishr ibn Abi Hazim, referred in their poems to shooting with stars. They used to regard the fall of a star or a meteor as the sign of a grand man's death or birth. There is a tradition, attributed to the Prophet (s), that he was once sitting among a group of his Companions when a falling meteor was suddenly seen in the sky. The Prophet (s) asked them: "What would you deem such a phenomenon in the Age of Ignorance?" They answered: "O Messenger of Allah! Upon seeing such

a meteor, we would say that a king passed away or a great man was born” (Ali 2001, 12:336).

The word “*shihab*” in Arabic originally refers to a flame of fire, and since a meteor appears like a flame of fire, this word was used to refer to it (Farahidi 1410 AH, 3:403; Ibn Manzur 1995, 1:509). The word was also used with the same meaning in the Arabic literature before and after Islam. For instance, Aswad Nahshili, a poet of the Age of Ignorance, said in one of his poems, “He threw up the spear, and then the spear continued to move as if it had been a burning meteor (*shihab*)” (Ibn Manzur 1995, 15:204). This usage of “*shihab*” semantically conforms to the Quranic usage of the word.

Bishr ibn Abi Hazim also once used the word “*kawkab*” (star) to refer to a meteor: “His donkey and the donkey kid moved so fast, and he followed them as fast as a meteor (*kawkab*)” (Alusi 1415 AH, 7:271).

5. Lapidating Devils with Meteors in Traditions

The traditions related to lapidating devils with meteors are of two types.

a) Traditions related to the lapidation before the Prophet’s mission

During the Age of Ignorance, there was a belief that meteors are stars that could move and fall down. In accordance with a narration by Aminah, the Prophet’s mother, upon the Prophet’s birth, a light appeared in the sky and some meteors fell. Observing this phenomenon and conceiving it as a sign of the end-time, the Quraysh consulted with Walid ibn Mughayra about the cause of the aforesaid light. Walid told them, “Look at those stars that direct you in the darkness of the sea and land. If they are ruined, it is the end-time; but if they are fixed at their positions, an event has occurred” (Saduq 1405 AH, 196). According to another source, searching for the cause of the mentioned phenomenon, the Quraysh consulted with a Jewish resident of Mecca, and based on biblical tidings, he informed them of a great man who, upon his birth, devils would be repulsed from the heavens. He told them that this grand man is a son of

‘Abd al-Muttalib, and the final and best prophet” (Qummi 1367 Sh, 1:374). A narration by Zajjaj mentions the story in a similar way. These narrations point to the fall of meteors as a miracle of the Prophet (Shawkani 1993, 3:151).

A narration also quotes the Prophet as saying, “The fall of a meteor is not related to the death or birth of anyone; rather ... Jinn listen [to the news of the heavens], and they get shot” (Ibn Hanbal 2008, 1:218; Baghawi 1992, 5:161).

Additionally, Awfi quotes Ibn Abbas as saying, “The heavens were not warded during the interval between Jesus and Muhammad, but when Muhammad was chosen, the heavens were highly protected and devils were lapidated” (Ibn Hajar n.d., 8:516). The Quran also indicates that the lapidation existed since the beginning of the time as a function of stars: “And verily We have beautified the world’s heaven with lamps, and We have made them missiles for the devils” (67:5). In another verse, we read, “[The jinn who had listened to the Quran said:] We had sought the heaven but had found it filled with strong warders and meteors” (72:8). According to this verse, with the Prophet’s mission, the protection of the heavens with meteors became more severe.

b) Traditions related to the lapidation after the advent of Islam

In these traditions, the themes of the previous category are mentioned with the emphasis that the fall of meteors to protect the heavens against jinn was restarted with the Prophet’s mission. For instance, Ibn Abbas is quoted as saying,

Some people of the Age of Ignorance were priests who claimed to be in contact with jinn. These jinn listened to heavenly news and conveyed it to the priests; the priests then gave the news to the people. Consequently, when the Prophet told the people about the unseen, they would say, “We have heard this previously.”

Devils had access to heavenly news till they were prevented from ascending to the heavens with the beginning of Jesus' mission; however, they still had access to four heavens. But they were repulsed from all seven heavens with the beginning of the Prophet's mission. After that, they would be targeted by meteors if they wished to ascend to the heavens. (Samarqandi 1416 AH, 2:253; Tha'labi 1994, 5:234).¹

In the literary works of the Age of Ignorance, nothing can be found on the concept of lapidating devils with meteors, except simply the idea of stars moving in the heavens and falling. However, it is unlikely that the Quran mentions the concept without the prior familiarity of its audience with it, because the purpose was to exonerate the Prophet from the accusation that he was receiving revelation from jinn, and that requires a prior belief of the audience in the ability of jinn to convey heavenly news.

6. Lapidating Devils with Meteors in Modern Commentaries

Due to the apparent inconsistency between the Quranic understanding of the function of meteors and modern scientific achievements, Quranic interpreters have taken various approaches in understanding the idea of lapidating devils with meteors. Some interpreters regard the verses in question to be pointing at a reality that falls beyond the reach of science, without contradicting it. For instance, Sayyid Qutb says,

Likewise it is not possible to object or argue about the meteors; they move in line with the system of the universe, both before and after the Prophet's mission, according to a law that astrologers try to interpret through theories which may be true or false. Even if these theories were true, they would not be against lapidating devils with meteors, as the fall of meteors is in accordance with the heavenly providence on which the system of existence is based. (Sayyid Qutb 1991, 6:3730)

1. See also Ibn Kathir (1419 AH, 7:5), Maraghi (n.d., 29, 98), and Tabari (2002, 23:46-47).

He also rejects the presence of symbolism in these verses. He states that those who see such verses as symbolic do not regard God to be infallible in His words; they just try to read their own concepts into the Quran. According to Sayyid Qutb, the right method of interpreting the Quran is for the exegete to understand the word of God without any presuppositions or prejudices, and try to base his thoughts on what the Quran and traditions provide. Only where the Quran is silent can he can rely on his own intellect and experience (Sayyid Qutb 1991, 6:3730).

Darwaza inclines towards the approach of Sayyid Qutb. In his commentary on Sura al-Jinn, he writes,

The presence of jinn and similar beings and the manner in which they listen to the heavens are unseen matters known to us through the Quran. We should believe in these and other unseen facts that the Quran has put forth, even though our senses do not feel them and our reason does not understand them. We shall shun dealing with whatever is not mentioned by the Quran, and we are not supposed to add to it. Human mind has always been incapable of understanding all the secrets and powers of existence (Darwaza 1961, 3:11).

Other interpreters have considered these verses to be symbolic in nature. Allamah Tabatabai states that the classical explanation for the eavesdropping of jinn and the function of meteors relies totally on the idea that the heavens are composed of firmaments which face the earth, and that many angels dwell in the said firmaments. There are some angels in the first heaven who have meteors in their grasps. They ambush the devils who try listen to heavenly news, and throw meteors at them. However, according to Allamah Tabatabai, the literal meaning of “heaven” and “meteor” is not meant in such verses; rather, a sort of allegory or symbolic sense is meant—as is the case with several other Quranic expressions, such as “empyrean,” “throne,” “tablet,” and so forth. What is meant by “heaven” seems to be the kingdom of God, and when it is said that devils try to get close to the heaven to listen to heavenly news and then they are targeted by meteors, it is meant that

they attempt to get close to the world of angels to attain the news, but the angels repulse them by an immaterial light which the devils cannot withstand (Allamah Tabatabai 1993, 17:187).

In his commentary on Sura al-Saffat (Quran 37), Ayatollah Javadi Amoli writes,

Indeed angels prevent the devils from listening to heavenly tidings; therefore, to regard these verses literally or figuratively depends on whether angels are regarded to be material or immaterial. If angels are considered immaterial, it is right to regard such verses as symbolic; however, if angels are regarded as material, the above verses should be taken literally. (Javadi Amoli 1392 Sh)

Ayatollah Misbah Yazdi believes that if the verses in question referred to material meteors, there would be no problem, since the presence of natural causes does not rule out the role of immaterial causes. It is possible to assume that angels can control the course of meteors, and after the Prophet's birth, God determined that if devils try to eavesdrop, angels throw meteors at them. This is similar to when people pray for rain, and God employs natural causes to fulfil their prayers. Therefore, there is no need to reject the literal meaning of such verses (Misbah Yazdi 2013, 2:309).

7. Conclusion

Muslim exegetes have given various interpretations for what the Quran means by lapidating devils with meteors. In the pre-modern period, the meaning of this Quranic expression was considered to be clear: Meccan unbelievers accused the Prophet of receiving the revelation from the jinn. The Quran responded to their accusations by saying that jinn had no access to the heavenly tidings, as the heavens were protected with meteors.

However, in the modern period, any relation between meteors and devils has been denied by scientists, and meteors have been considered to be simply stones that are scattered in the sky, burning and

transforming into fire upon entering the earth's atmosphere. These scientific developments changed the way the interpreters of the Quran understood the verses in question.

Some commentators regard the idea of lapidating devils with meteors as related to the immaterial world, which falls beyond human understanding; therefore, they refrain from interpreting it. However, this attitude cannot explain how mentioning an unfathomable idea could function as a response to the accusations of Meccan disbelievers of the time of the Prophet. Other interpreters maintain that it is possible that the meteors actually drive away the jinn from the abode of angels, but this theory is not acceptable either, as angels are not material beings to live in the material sky.

Others have suggested non-literal interpretations for these verses. They believe that these verses do not refer to material meteors or heavens, but to the fact that jinn are not allowed to enter God's throne. This would mean that during the first fourteen centuries of Islam, the verses of the Quran were misunderstood, which is not in line with the fact that the Quran is the guide for all mankind.

Based on this analysis, it can be concluded that the right interpretation is to say that the Quran employs the idea of lapidating devils with meteors, which was familiar to its original audience, in order to reject the accusation by Meccan unbelievers that the Prophet received the revelation from devils. However, what the Quran in fact states in the form of that familiar idea is that devils are incapable of ascending to the spiritual world of angels to receive heavenly news. Thus, in this theory, both the literal meaning of the verses in question, which was what Muslims understood in the past fourteen centuries, and the purity of the Quran from unscientific claims are preserved.

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