

INHERITORS OF THE QURAN: AN ANALYSIS FROM THE LENS OF QURANIC VERSES AND ISLAMIC TRADITIONS

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Abstract

The identification of the rightful heirs to the sacred text is a topic discussed in verse 32 of Surah Fatir. Scholars have proposed three main viewpoints: some argue that the prophets are the inheritors, others suggest that the believers hold this position, and yet another perspective posits that the Prophet's community and Islamic scholars are potential candidates. Additionally, certain Islamic traditions present the Imams as divinely chosen successors and inheritors of the Book, specifically referring to the Quran. This study explores and substantiates the latter viewpoint through a comprehensive examination of Quranic verses, traditional accounts, and literary sources.

Keywords: 'awrathnā (We have inherited), 'aṣṭafīnā (We have chosen), al-kitāb (The Book), zālimun li-nafsihi (Wronging oneself), muqtaṣid (The moderate)

Introduction

In Surah Fatir, verse 32, Allah declares that He has selected a group of His servants to be the inheritors of the Book and further divides these servants into three categories: those who commit injustice against themselves, the moderate, and those who are distinguished in performing good deeds with His permission. The verse reads: "Then We caused to inherit the Book those We have chosen of Our servants; [1251] and among them is he who wrongs himself [i.e., sins], and among them is he who is moderate, and among them is he who is foremost in good deeds by permission of Allāh. That [inheritance] is what is the great bounty." The determination of who these heirs are has been a subject of contemplation for scholars. Before delving into the various interpretations, it is essential to explore the significance of certain pivotal terms within the verse.

The Concept of Inheritance

The term "inheritance" encompasses the passing of assets from a deceased individual to their heirs, as well as the transfer of wealth between individuals without a formal contract. This idea is

explored by Al-Raghib al-Isfahani (1412 AH, p. 863) and Ibn Faris (undated, 5/424). The concept extends beyond mere financial bequests to include the transmission of qualities like honor and courage (Ibn al-Athir, 1988, 2/148), wisdom and intellect (*ibid*, 1/37; al-Zamakhshari, 1979, 671), and even the spreading of maladies and discomforts from one person to another (al-Zamakhshari, 1417 AH, 1/29). While most linguistic experts have not addressed the metaphorical aspect of certain examples, the author of *Taj al-Arus* does note the figurative application of the term, observing that "its use in the context of evil or war is metaphorical" (Hossein Zobydi, 1414 AH, 3/164).

Inheritance is polysemous, encompassing various meanings, some of which are literal, such as the bequest of financial assets and the acquisition of knowledge and courage from predecessors. Tabataba'i discusses this, noting that: "Derivatives of this word, particularly in the Quran, are often used in non-material contexts, so much so that the metaphorical sense, through frequent usage, has almost equaled the literal meaning" (Tabataba'i, 1417 AH, 14/23). He further observes: "The immediate association with 'inheritance' is the receipt of a deceased person's belongings and wealth, yet the term's essence may be rooted in financial inheritance or, in non-material contexts, be metaphorical" (*ibid*, 14/10). In the verse in question, the inheritance refers to the acquisition of knowledge, and comprehension of the Quran, its interpretations, laws, and doctrines (Ibn Shahrashub, 1990, 1/206; Ibn Atiyah, 1422 AH, 4/438). The focus is not on the physical form of the Book—its pages and script—but on its linguistic and conceptual content. Consequently, "Mirath al-Kitab" is viewed metaphorically by many Shia scholars, signifying the transmission of the Book's knowledge and understanding to its legitimate heirs.

The Interpretation of "al-Kitab"

The verse under discussion and its predecessor appear to be interconnected, implying that the Prophet was entrusted with a mission and his sacred text, the Quran, and subsequently, God chose specific individuals to whom He passed down this divine book as an inheritance. Consequently, in both verses, "al-Kitab" is understood to mean the Quran. Some exegetes suggest that the letters "A" and "L" in "al-Kitab" represent a covenant (Ibn Kathir, 1419 AH, 6/484; Makarem, 1995, 18/260). Shaykh Tabarsi, following a review of various interpretations, concurs that the term "al-Kitab" is unequivocally applied to the Quran (Tabarsi, 1993, 8/638). While there are instances where the Torah is referred to as "al-Kitab" and the Jews are designated as "People of the Book" (e.g., Surah Al-Baqarah: 53, 101, 87, 105, 109), it is improbable and inconsistent with the context of the preceding verses to interpret "al-Kitab" as an allusion to all divine scriptures, with "A" and "L" serving as generic indicators.

The Concept of "Istifa"

The term "Istifa" denotes the unadulterated state of an entity, free from any mixture with other substances, and stands in contrast to opaque," which connotes impurity or taint (al-Farahidi, 1409 AH, 14/462; Ibn Manzur, 1414 AH, 7/163). "Istifa" is the act of choosing the quintessence or the most refined aspect of something, embodying the ideas of intent, preference, aspiration, potential, endorsement, and being an integral part of the divine creation and design, which

transcend human volition (Mostafavi, 1989, 6/257-259; Al-Raghib al-Isfahani, 1412 AH, 488; Tabataba'i, 1417 AH, 1/154). Essentially, in this context, "Istifa" requires that a devotee conduct their life in full accordance with their dedication and devotion to their Lord, exhibiting pure and unadulterated submission. This submission is realized through the practice of religion in every facet of life, as religion itself is the embodiment of devotion in both temporal and spiritual domains (Tabataba'i, 1417 AH, 1/300).

Reference of the pronoun "Famanhum"

The interpretation of the pronoun "famanhum" within the verse has sparked debate. If it is understood to relate to "ibadina," then a Muslim who commits an injustice against himself would be excluded from the legacy of the Quran. Conversely, if the pronoun is linked to "istafayna," then such an unjust individual would be deemed among the elect of the Quran. There is a division among scholars, with some endorsing the former perspective and others the latter. Al-Qurtubi, Muhammad (1985) 14/546, for instance, posits that the pronoun pertains to "ibadina," whereas Ibn Kathir (1419 AH) 6/484, argues for its connection to "istafayna."

The pronoun "famanhum" in the expression "famanhum zalimun li-nafsihi" appears to refer to "ibadina," suggesting that Allah is delineating various kinds of servants: some are disobedient and sinful (zalimun li-nafsihi), others are moderate (muqtaṣid), and yet others excel in righteous deeds (sabiḳ bi'l-khairat). Following this classification, Allah chooses a particular group and designates them as the heirs of the Quran, rather than including all types of servants, even the unjust, among the chosen for Quranic inheritance, which would render the selection process inconsequential.

Instead, Allah distinguishes three classes of servants, and from these, only those who excel in righteous deeds (sabiḳ bi'l-khairat) are selected (istafayna min ibadina) as the inheritors of the Quran. This may explain why it is suggested that the pronoun "hum" in "famanhum" refers to "ibadina," given its proximity to the pronoun compared to "al-ladhina istafayna," and by the principle of "al'aqrab li'l'aqrab," it points back to "ibad" instead of "al-ladhina istafayna." Based on the rationale presented in this exposition, the pronoun "famanhum" refers to "ibadina," thereby disqualifying the unjust from inheriting the Quran.

The Meaning of the Word "Zulm"

The term "zulm" in Arabic carries a dual significance: it refers to either darkness or the act of positioning something in a location that is not its proper or designated place (Ibn Faris, n.d., 3/468). According to some interpretations, this involves placing an item in an incorrect position, which may be achieved through either a lack or an excess, or by altering its temporal or spatial context (Al-Raghib al-Isfahani, 1412 AH, p. 537). In simpler terms, "zulm" can be understood as the reduction of a right or the misplacement of an object (al-Qurashi, 1412 AH, 4/270). This concept is categorized into three distinct forms:

a) *Zulm* to oneself and sin, as in "And when you divorce women and they have [nearly] fulfilled their term, either retain them according to acceptable terms or release them according to acceptable terms, and do not keep them, intending harm, to transgress [against them]. And

whoever does that has certainly wronged himself. And do not take the verses of Allāh in jest. And remember the favor of Allāh upon you and what has been revealed to you of the Book [i.e., the Qur'ān] and wisdom [i.e., the Prophet's sunnah] by which He instructs you. And fear Allāh and know that Allāh is Knowing of all things." (Surah Al-Baqarah, 231)

b) *Zulm* to others, which is not forgiven unless there is consent, as in "And the retribution for an evil act is an evil one like it, but whoever pardons and makes reconciliation - his reward is [due] from Allāh. Indeed, He does not like wrongdoers." (Surah Ash-Shūra, 40)

c) *Zulm* between humans and God (i.e., disbelief, polytheism, hypocrisy, and any form of disobedience or lack of faith towards God), which is a form of ideological *zulm* and is considered a great injustice in the Quran, as in "And [mention, O Muḥammad], when Luqmān said to his son while he was instructing him, 'O my son, do not associate [anything] with Allāh. Indeed, association [with Him] is great injustice.'" (Surah Luqmān, 13)

The Reference of the Divine Chosen Ones in the Verse

Concerning the identification of the chosen individuals referred to in the esteemed verse, various theories have been proposed. Some scholars argue that the reference is to the prophets, while others suggest that it pertains to the believers (Ibn Ashur (n.d.), 22/164). Additionally, some posit that it refers to the Prophet's community (Ibn Kathir (1419 AH), 6/484; Ibn Atiyah (1422 AH), 4/438), and others who identify the learned members of the Prophet's community as the chosen, with certain traditions presenting the Imams as the divinely chosen in the verse (Tabarsi (1993), 8/638; Abu al-Futuh al-Razi (1408 AH), 16/108).

The rationale behind the exclusion of an unjust person from being considered among the divinely chosen is as follows:

1. The employment of the term '*astafina* (*istafayna*) in the esteemed verse

The term '*astafina* (*istafayna*), as used in the verse in question, implies that an unjust individual is unfit to inherit the Quran. This is because the term originates from the root "*ṣafw*," which, according to the scholar Tabataba'i, denotes the selection and choice of one from multiple options (Tabataba'i (1417 AH), 17/45). Given this connotation, the verse's scope does not include ordinary, virtuous, and devout individuals, much less an unjust person who is admonished within the verse. Furthermore, the term is employed in the Quran to describe infallible individuals. For example, the word *istafa* is utilized in verses such as "Al-Baqarah /130 and 247, Al Imran /33 and 42, Al-A'raf / 42 and 144, Al-Hajj /75, An-Naml /59, and p /47," specifically about the prophets.

2. Allusion to the Unjust and Their Reproach

The expression "*zalim li-nafsihi*" within the verse signifies that those referred to cannot be the elect of God nor the inheritors of the sacred text, as injustice is irreconcilable with being chosen for the loftiest divine station, and the wisdom of God does not warrant the selection of such individuals. This term serves as an allusion to the inquiry of how a person who perpetrates injustice upon themselves and is culpable of sin and misconduct could be deemed worthy of such a significant duty. In "Al-Tibbyan Fi Tafsir al-Quran," the metaphorical character of the word

"zalimun" is elucidated as such¹: The allusion in the verse "famanhum zalimun li-nafsihi" pertains to wayward and sinful servants, as it is impermissible for the allusion to refer to the chosen servants of God (Shaykh Tusi (n.d.), 8/430).

Were God to select the unjust as the heirs of the Quran and subsequently chastise them, it would lack a sound rationale; for under this premise, God would have, on one hand, elected them to inherit the entirety of Quranic knowledge, and on the other hand, He would have admonished them through an allusion, questioning why these chosen ones are "zalim li-nafsihi." Consequently, the allusion targets the disobedient servants ("zalim li-nafsihi"), and it constitutes an indirect declaration from God that they ought to be compliant and adhere to His directives, yet they are rebellious and unjust. In essence, God is conveying: My servants are of three categories... and there is a group that, while they are My servants and expected to be compliant and follow My directives, they are instead rebellious and do not adhere to My commands. Hence, such individuals have not been selected by Me for the pivotal role of inheriting the Quran.

3. Due to the Unjust Being Deprived of the Status of "Paradise of Eden"

The subsequent verse to the one under scrutiny designates the "Gardens of Eden" as the recompense for those chosen by the divine and the inheritors of the Quran, a distinction that cannot be bestowed upon a common individual, much less one who is "zalim li-nafsihi." This esteemed position is expressly earmarked for the "foremost" individuals mentioned in the verse, and it is incongruous for the unjust to be their equals or partake in such a bestowal, as it would run counter to divine wisdom. Upon contemplating specific verses of the Quran, we deduce that the unjust are incapable of achieving such a rank and, consequently, cannot be the successors of the Quran. For example, verses 71 and 72 of Surah At-Tawbah declare that those who heed God and His Messenger (yatru:na: lla:ha wa rasoolahu) shall attain the status of Paradise of Eden. Given that the unjust individual referred to in the verse lacks such adherence to God, the label "zalim" has been ascribed to them, thereby precluding them from the status of Paradise of Eden.

Furthermore, the divine contentment and favor bestowed upon the faithful in Paradise, along with their achievement of supreme victory (رِضْوَانٌ مِنَ اللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ ذَلِكَ هُوَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ), hold no relevance for an individual who is unjust, insubordinate, and defiant. Should such an individual somehow attain a status akin to that of Eden, the Quran would not characterize them as "zalim" (نَمْ أَوْرَتْنَا) (فَمِنْهُمْ ظَالِمٌ لِنَفْسِهِ (الْكِتَابِ ... فَمِنْهُمْ ظَالِمٌ لِنَفْسِهِ) Fatir/33, nor would it subject them to criticism, divest them of guidance and covenant (Al-Baqarah /124 and 285), condemn them with curses, or consign them to the inferno with its excruciating torment (Hud/18 and Al-Furqan /37).

4. The Implication of Quranic Verses Regarding the Punishment and Retribution of Sinners

A cursory examination of the numerous verses addressing the unjust makes it unequivocally

¹ Within the discipline of rhetorical studies, an allusion is characterized as a term or expression that is designed to convey a metaphorical sense. However, in the absence of a contextual cue that would inhibit the understanding of its literal sense, it is acceptable for the literal interpretation to be concurrently intended. A case in point is the expression "Zaydun Tawilun al-Najad" (Zayd of the long sword belt), which suggests that Zayd is not only courageous but also of considerable height. (Hashimi, Seyyed Ahmad, Jawahir al-Balagha, page 281, Islamic Seminary of Qom, First Edition, 1999.)

clear that divine guidance (Al-Baqarah /285) and the divine covenant (Al-Baqarah /124) are not bestowed upon them. Instead, they are subjected to God's condemnation and are destined for the inferno (Hud /18), for which God has ordained a torment of anguish (Al-Furqan /37). Attributing injustice to the custodians of the Quran is completely unwarranted.

5. Due to Narrations from the Infallibles, Regarding the Reproach and Admonishment of the Unjust

Concerning determining the nature and the manifestation of the unjust as depicted in the verse in question, a variety of accounts have been documented in interpretive scriptures and narrated traditions. These include descriptions such as: "The unjust within the verse refers to someone who rejects and obscures the favors of God," or "a person who perpetrates a grave sin," or "one who is lacking in knowledge" (Al-Baghawi (1420 AH) 6/369), or "the unjust is synonymous with 'those on the left'" (al-Alusi, Mahmud, (1415 AH), al-Alusi, (1415 AH, 10, 3182), or "the unjust is a hypocrite," or "the unjust is an infidel" (al-Suyuti (1401 AH) 5/252).

6. Due to the Necessity of Coherence and Harmony Between the Words and Sentences of the Verse (اصْطَفَيْنَا مِنْ عِبَادِنَا... فَمِنْهُمْ ظَالِمٌ لِنَفْسِهِ... ذَلِكَ هُوَ الْفَضْلُ الْكَبِيرُ) translation: We have chosen from among Our servants... among them wrongs himself... that is the great bounty)

At the core of the inquiry is the identification of the custodians of this sacred heritage. If it is posited that the designated successors of this legacy fall into three groups, one of which encompasses those who commit injustice against themselves, then endorsing this idea stands at odds with the "great bounty" (Dhalika al-Fadlu al-Kabir) that the Quran represents. This prompts the query: By what measure or criterion have the unjust been designated as heirs to a celestial text that God Himself describes as a great bounty? How can someone labeled as "zalim li-nafsihi" (self-oppressor) contribute meaningfully to the preservation of this text? How can such an individual be granted the paradisiacal Garden of Eden, as the subsequent verse suggests, as a reward for the heirs of the Quran? The notion of such a person being the rightful heir of the Quran and gaining access to Eden challenges the divine wisdom, as God does not label someone as unjust without cause, and the divine choice, rooted in Quranic teachings, must serve a purpose. God's intentions are governed by principles and are just, with His actions neither arbitrary nor aimless. Instead, they are grounded in wisdom ("He discloses what He wills by His leave. He is the Sublime, the Wise" - Shura /51), knowledge ("God is fully aware of where to place His message" - Al-An'am /124), and grace ("God is Gentle with His servants, providing for whomever He chooses. He is the Strong, the Majestic" - Shura /19). A God who is both wise and omniscient would not entrust the sacred legacy and the wisdom of His Quran, the most profound and delicate of divine trusts, indifferently to both the righteous and the unrighteous. If the Quranic heritage refers to the physical book and its script, then this heritage is within reach of the unjust Muslim, as it is for all of humanity, believers and non-believers alike.

7. The Implication of the Phrase (Dhalika al-Fadlu al-Kabir) on Felicity and Infallibility

When interpreting the significance of the phrase (Dhalika al-Fadlu al-Kabir), it is explained

that it signifies: heavenly direction and priority in achieving righteousness and the legacy of the Quran (Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, (1420 AH) 26/240 and al-Baydawi, (1418 AH) 4/259), divine election and succession to the Quran (al-Alusi, (1415 AH), 11/370), and the bequest of the Quran (al-Tusi, (n.d.) 8/430). Nevertheless, considering that this phrase directly succeeds the declaration (مِنْهُمْ سَابِقٌ بِالْخَيْرَاتِ بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ; translation: some of them are ahead in virtuous acts by God's permission), the demonstrative (Dhalika) alludes, by the principle of proximity, to those who are leading in virtuous acts. This implies that such individuals, by their excellence and deservingness, have been selected by God to be the inheritors of the Quran.

Given that "virtues" encompass all good deeds in their plurality, those who have assumed the vanguard in all virtuous endeavors could not have accomplished this without divine affirmation and backing. Consequently, the expression "by God's leave" underscores the essential role of divine direction and support, which has been their companion and has empowered them to excel in every form of goodness and to outpace others in the pursuit of righteousness and benevolence. The verse culminates with "That is the great bounty," intimating exclusivity; it suggests that the attribute of forging ahead in virtues is an exceptional grace reserved for select individuals, and divine providence has been instrumental in conferring this grace-bestowing it upon certain individuals through infallibility or imamate while denying it to others for diverse reasons. This exceptional grace may correspond to what is alluded to in Surah Yusuf ("Yusuf /24") as evidence, and Tabataba'i offers insight into the divine evidence granted to Prophet Yusuf: " And she certainly determined [to seduce] him, and he would have inclined to her had he not seen the proof [i.e., sign] of his Lord. And thus [it was] that We should avert from him evil and immorality. Indeed, he was one of Our chosen servants" (Tabataba'i, (1417 AH), 11/129).

Conclusion

Certain scholars posit that within verse 32 of Surah Fatir, all of God's creations are designated as heirs to the sacred text. Nonetheless, given that some among them are labeled as unjust, it seems that only a particular subset, handpicked by God (Istifā'), are the rightful inheritors of the Quran. This assertion is bolstered by several lines of evidence:

1. The employment of the term "Istifā'" (We have chosen) within the verse, suggests a deliberate act of selection.
2. The allusion to the unjust and their subsequent censure.
3. The disqualification of the unjust from the rank of "Garden of Eden."
4. The Quranic verses' indication of punishment and recompense for wrongdoers.
5. The existence of accounts from impeccable sources that condemn and rebuke the unjust.
6. The requirement for consistency and congruity among the verse's lexicon and syntax.
7. The connotation of the phrase "Dhalika al-Fadlu al-Kabir" (That is the great bounty) with divine favor and infallibility.

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