

Surah 24. An-Nur

Asad: God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His light is, as it were,⁵⁰ that of a niche containing a lamp; the lamp is [enclosed] in glass, the glass [shining] like a radiant star:⁵¹ [a lamp] lit from a blessed tree -an olive-tree that is neither of the east nor of the west⁵² - the oil whereof [is so bright that it] would well-nigh give light [of itself] even though fire had not touched it: light upon light!⁵³ God guides unto His light him that wills [to be guided];⁵⁴ and [to this end] God propounds parables unto men, since God [alone] has full knowledge of all things.⁵⁵

Malik: Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is as if there were a Niche, in which there is a lamp, the lamp is enclosed in crystal, the crystal is of a starlike brilliance, it is lit with the olive oil from a blessed olive tree which is neither eastern nor western, its very oil would almost be luminous though no fire touched it - as though all the means of increasing Light upon Light are provided - Allah guides to His Light whom He pleases. Allah cites such parables to make His message clear to the people; and Allah has knowledge of everything.

Pickthall: Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as it were a shining star. (This lamp is) kindled from a blessed tree, an olive neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil would almost glow forth (of itself) though no fire touched it. Light upon light, Allah guideth unto His light whom He will. And Allah speaketh to mankind in allegories, for Allah is knower of all things.

Yusuf Ali: Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is as if there were a Niche and within it a lamp: the Lamp enclosed in Glass: the glass as it were a brilliant star: lit from a blessed Tree an Olive neither of the East nor of the West whose Oil is well-nigh luminous though fire scarce touched it: Light upon Light! Allah doth guide whom He will to His Light. Allah doth set forth Parables for men: and Allah doth know all things. [2996](#) [2997](#) [2998](#) [2999](#) [3000](#) [3001](#) [3002](#) [3003](#)

Transliteration: Allahu nooru alssamawati waalardi mathalu noorihi kamishkatin feeha misbahun almisbahu fee zujajatin alzzujajatu kaannah kawkabun durriyyun yooqadu min shajaratin mubarakatin zaytoonatin la sharqiyyatin wala gharbiyyatin yakadu zaytuha yudeeo walaw lam tamsashu narun noorun AAala noorin yahdee Allahu linoorihi man yashao wayadribu Allahu alamthala liInnasi waAllahu bikulli shayin AAaleemun

Khatab:

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. His light¹ is like a niche in which there is a lamp, the lamp is in a crystal, the crystal is like a shining star, lit from ?the oil of? a blessed olive tree, ?located? neither to the east nor the west,² whose oil would almost glow, even without being touched by fire. Light upon light! Allah guides whoever He wills to His light. And Allah sets forth parables for humanity. For Allah has ?perfect? knowledge of all things.

Author Comments

50 - The particle ka ("as if" or "as it were") prefixed to a noun is called kaf at-tashbih ("the letter kaf pointing to a resemblance [of one thing to another]" or "indicating a metaphor"). In the above context it

alludes to the impossibility of defining God even by means of a metaphor or a parable - for, since "there is nothing like unto Him" ([42:11](#)), there is also "nothing that could be compared with Him" ([112:4](#)). Hence, the parable of "the light of God" is not meant to express His reality - which is inconceivable to any created being and, therefore, inexpressible in any human language - but only to allude to the illumination which He, who is the Ultimate Truth, bestows upon the mind and the feelings of all who are willing to be guided. Tabari, Baghawi and Ibn Kathir quote Ibn 'Abbas and Ibn Mas'ud as saying in this context: "It is the parable of His light in the heart of a believer."

51 - The "lamp" is the revelation which God grants to His prophets and which is reflected in the believer's heart - the "niche" of the above parable (Ubayy ibn Ka'b, as quoted by Tabari) - after being received and consciously grasped by his reason ("the glass [shining brightly] like a radiant star"): for it is through reason alone that true faith can find its way into the heart of man.

52 - It would seem that this is an allusion to the organic continuity of all divine revelation which, starting like a tree from one "root" or proposition - the statement of God's existence and uniqueness - grows steadily throughout man's spiritual history, branching out into a splendid variety of religious experience, thus endlessly widening the range of man's perception of the truth. The association of this concept with the olive-tree apparently arises from the fact that this particular kind of tree is characteristic of the lands in which most of the prophetic precursors of the Qur'anic message lived, namely, the lands to the east of the mediterranean: but since all true revelation flows from the Infinite Being, it is "neither of the east nor of the west" - and especially so the revelation of the Qur'an, which, being addressed to all mankind, is universal in its goal as well.

53 - The essence of the Qur'anic message is described elsewhere as "clear [in itself] and clearly showing the truth" (cf. note [2] on [12:1](#)); and it is, I believe, this aspect of the Qur'an that the above sentence alludes to. Its message gives light because it proceeds from God; but it "would well-nigh give light [of itself] even though fire had not touched it": i.e., even though one may be unaware that it has been "touched by the fire" of divine revelation, its inner consistency, truth and wisdom ought to be self-evident to anyone who approaches it in the light of his reason and without prejudice.

54 - Although most of the commentators read the above phrase in the sense of "God guides unto His light whomever He wills", Zamakhshari gives it the sense adopted in my rendering (both being syntactically permissible).

55 - I.e., because of their complexity, certain truths can be conveyed to man only by means of parables or

allegories: see notes [5] and [8] on [3:7](#).

29508 -

This is a metaphor for the light of guidance in the heart of the believer.

29509 -

Meaning, the olive tree is wholesome because it is located in a central place, so it is hit by sunrays all day-long, and, therefore, the oil is of a premium quality.

2996 - Embedded within certain directions concerning a refined domestic and social life, comes this glorious parable of light, which contains layer upon layer of transcendent truth about spiritual mysteries. No notes can do adequate justice to its full meaning. Volumes have been written on this subject. In these notes I propose to explain the simplest meaning of this passage.

2997 - The physical light is but a reflection of the true Light in the world of Reality, and that true Light is Allah. We can only think of Allah in terms of our phenomenal experience, and in the phenomenal world, light is the purest thing we know, but physical light has drawbacks incidental to its physical nature: eg. (1) it is dependent upon some source external to itself; (2) it is a passing phenomenon; if we take it to be a form of motion or energy it is unstable, like all physical phenomena; (3) it is dependent on space and time; its speed is 186,000 miles per second, and there are stars whose light takes thousands of years before it reaches the earth. The perfect Light of Allah is free from any such defects.

2998 - The first three points in the Parable center round the symbols of the Niche, the Lamp, and the Glass. (1) The Niche (Mishkat) is the little shallow recess in the wall of an Eastern house, fairly high from the ground, in which a light (before the days of electricity) was usually placed. Its height enabled it to

diffuse the light in the room and minimised the shadows. The background of the wall and the sides of the niche helped to throw the light well into the room, and if the wall was white-washed, it also acted as a reflector: the opening in front made the way for the light. So with the spiritual Light; it is placed high, above worldly things; it has a niche or habitation of its own, in Revelation and other Signs of Allah; its access to men is by a special Way, open to all, yet closed to those who refuse its rays. (2) The Lamp is the core of the spiritual Truth, which is the real illumination; the Niche is nothing without it; the Niche is actually made for it. (3) The Glass is the transparent medium through which the Light passes. On the one hand, it protects the light from moths and other forms of low life and from gusts of wind, and on the other, it transmits the light through a medium which is made up of and akin to the grosser substances of the earth (such as sand, soda, potash, etc.), so arranged as to admit the subtle to the gross by its transparency. So the spiritual Truth has to be filtered through human language or human intelligence to make it intelligible to mankind.

2999 - The glass by itself does not shine. But when the light comes into it, it shines like a brilliant star. So men of God, who preach Allah's Truth, are themselves illuminated by Allah's light and become the illuminating media through which that Light spreads and permeates human life.

3000 - The olive tree is not a very impressive tree in its outward appearance. Its leaves have a dull greenish-brown colour, and in size it is inconspicuous. But its oil is used in sacred ceremonies and forms a wholesome ingredient of food. The fruit has a specially fine flavour. Cf. n. 2880 to xxiii. 20. For the illuminating quality of its oil, see n. 3002 below.

3001 - This Olive is not localised. It is neither of the East nor of the West. It is universal, for such is Allah's Light. As applied to the olive, there is also a more literal meaning, which can be allegorised in a different way. An olive tree with an eastern aspect gets only the rays of the morning sun; one with a western aspect, only the rays of the western sun. In the northern hemisphere the south aspect will give the sun's rays a great part of the day, while a north aspect will shut them out altogether, and vice versa in the southern hemisphere. But a tree in the open plain or on a hill will get perpetual sunshine by day; it will be more mature, and the fruit and oil will be of superior quality. So Allah's light is not localised or immature: it is perfect and universal.

3002 - Pure olive oil is beautiful in colour, consistency, and illuminating power. The world has tried all kinds of illuminants, and for economic reasons or convenience, one replaces another. But for coolness, comfort to the eyes, and steadiness, vegetable oils are superior to electricity, mineral oils, and animal oils. And among vegetable oils, olive oil takes a high place and deserves its sacred associations. Its purity is almost like light itself: you may suppose it to be almost light before it is lit. So with spiritual Truth: it illuminates the mind and understanding imperceptibly, almost before the human mind and heart have been consciously touched by it.

3003 - Glorious, illimitable Light, which cannot be described or measured. And there are grades and grades of it, passing transcendently into regions of spiritual height, which man's imagination can scarcely conceive of. The topmost pinnacle is the true prototypal Light, the real Light, of which all others were reflections, the Light of Allah.

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