THE LIGHT VERSE: QUR'ÂNIC TEXT AND ŞÛFÎ INTERPRETATION

by

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For Franz Rosenthal on his eighty-fifth birthday

Throughout the ages, light has been valued as the most beautiful phenomenon of creation and the eye that perceives it as the most important human organ of sense perception. Monotheistic religions such as Islam seek the origin of natural light in God, the eternal source of light, an unapproachable light without darkness, and they actualize the desire to know God in an act of seeing the divine light. Maintaining the distinction between Creator and creation, earthly light is understood as an image of eternal light, though following the principle of like drawing to like, light can only be known through light. God can be seen only through an inner eye, the spirit or the intellect, and this vision of God cannot be achieved by human effort alone. Rather, it is ultimately a gift of God, an illumination. God is not identical in essence with light, and natural light does not coincide with divine light, although light is the most inclusive attribute by which God is described. At the same time, light is the most exalted image by which the invisible God can be represented in a visible and temporal world, and the most powerful symbol by which the eternal God can be apprehended in the human realm of sense perception and intellectual insight.

In the Qur‘ân, the Holy Book of Islam, the theme of light, God’s light, is most directly addressed in the famous “light verse,” Q 24:35, which this article analyzes in two stages. First, explaining the Qur‘ân by the Qur‘ân, the wording of the qur’anic text is compared methodically with parallel passages, and this inner-qur’anic evidence is set against the cultural and religious background of Arabia during Muhammad’s lifetime. Second, relevant Şûfî interpretations from the Qur‘ân commentaries of Sulamî (d. 412/1021), Qušayrî (d. 465/1072) and Daylami (d. shortly after 593/1197) are selected to illustrate the overlay of the qur’anic text with various themes.
reflecting the cultural and religious background of 3rd/9th to 6th/12th century Iraq and Iran, in particular that of Bağdād, the capital of the ʿAbbāsid empire, and Ḥurasān, its eastern province.

The verse Q 24:35 in the actual text of the Qur‘an, which we hold in our hands today, reads as follows:

The Arabic of the verse may be translated in the following standard way:

“God is the light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp – the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star kindled from a blessed tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West whose oil well-nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it; light upon light. God guides to His light whom He wills. And God strikes similes for men, and God has knowledge of everything.”

This verse, widely known in Muslim sources as the “light verse” (āyat an-nūr) and characterized as a simile or a metaphor, forms part of the Medinan sura that takes its name from this passage.\(^1\) The full sura, as it stands, deals principally with domestic legislation and prescriptions for proper Muslim

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