

## The criterion of human dignity in the Quran

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### Abstract

In the Holy Quran, a strong emphasis has been placed on the dignity of human beings. There are two verses in the Quran that discuss the differences between humans and other creatures. In this article, we have tried to interpret these two verses using free selection of virtues and goodness as the criterion for human dignity that was obtained in our previous research. In the verse of trust, unlike other creatures, man accepts a trust that informs us about his cruelty and ignorance. However, if we consider this trust as freedom of choice, it can also imply injustice and ignorance alongside justice and wisdom for humans. In the verse of succession, angels tell God that human as vicegerent on earth leads to corruption and bloodshed. God does not deny this, but reminds the angels of the existence of pure ones. If we consider freely choosing goodness the differentiating factor between humans and other creatures the angels accurately refer to the possibility of creating corruption and bloodshed. However, they did not see the value of voluntary goodness compared to their own compulsory goodness.

Therefore, by considering freely choosing goodness as the criterion for human dignity, these two verses can be easily interpreted.

**Keywords:** Human dignity; Bioethics, Quran; Islamic Jurisprudence; Human rights.

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**Received:** 10 Sep 2023

**Accepted:** 22 Jan 2024

**Published:** 24 Apr 2024

#### Citation to this article:

Jafari SA, Araminia B, Tavasoli N, Tavasoli H, Abedi S, Navab SA, Talebi Darabi B. The criterion of human dignity in the Quran. *J Med Ethics Hist Med.* 2024; 17: 2.

## ***Introduction***

Human dignity is the most important subject in Humanities and the fundamental legal concept on which human right is built (1, 2). Attributing dignity to humans and subsequently, determining rights for humans based on this dignity depends on identifying a criterion for the existence of this dignity. The characteristic that could serve as the criterion of human dignity should exist only in humans and not any other being in order to make human worthy of the rights resulting from this dignity. Different schools of thought throughout history have proposed different criteria for human dignity, such as belief, reason, and human biology (3). Different religions have defined a standard for human dignity as well. The amount of attention paid to this issue shows the place of human and anthropology in every religion. However, there are significant differences between the jurists of different religions in the nature and limits of this criterion. It seems that in order to resolve differences and reach the true standard of human dignity, one should study the main texts of that religion (4). In Islam, this main source is the Qur'an. In the Qur'an, the dignity of human is

emphasized and the legal and mystical perspective of human is explained according to this dignity (5). The most famous verse in this regard and in this book is: Surah Asra, verse 70:” *Certainly We have honored the Children of Adam, and carried them over land and sea, and provided them with all the good things, and preferred them with a complete preference over many of those we have created.*” In this verse, despite the mention of the concept and instances of dignity, the criteria for this difference with other creatures are not addressed. Other verses also address this issue in various ways, but two verses, in a profound, obvious, and detailed manner, address the difference between humans and other beings: the verses of "caliphate" and "trust", Although both of these verses have interpretive disputes and ambiguities. In our previous article, "Examining the criteria of human dignity", we examined the possible criteria for human dignity and chose “free selection of virtues and goodness” as the criterion of human dignity (6). In this article, we are going to examine these two verses in detail with regard to the basic principles of human dignity and examine the compatibility of our chosen criteria of human dignity in the previous article, i.e., free selection of

virtues goodness, with this interpretation of these two verses. For this purpose, we will use reference sources for Qur'an interpretation, philosophical sources, and Arabic grammar sources. In this study we aim to examine these verses in order to reach an answer for the criterion of human dignity from the perspective of the Qur'an which can have a wide impact on jurisprudence in Islamic countries.

## ***Discussion***

### ***A: Verse of Trust or “Al-amanah”***

In verse 72 of Surah Al-Ahzab of the Qur'an, it is said that "Indeed we presented the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to undertake it and were apprehensive of it; but man undertook it. Indeed, he is most unjust and ignorant." This verse is a delicate and symbolic expression that considers human beings as superior to the heavens and the earth, because he has been "unjust" and "ignorant"! This verse is related to the search for human dignity and its criteria in two ways, the apparent and the hidden.

The apparent way is the attention of the verse to the fundamental separation of humans from other beings by bearing this trust, which should be considered in the criteria of being human. The hidden and more profound way that this verse is related to human dignity is the nature of this trust,

how accepting it is in the criteria of being human, and how accepting this trust can lead to becoming "unjust" and "ignorant".

Interpreters have faced difficulties in interpreting this verse (7, 8). The context of other verses, especially the verse of dignity (Surah Asra, verse 70), implies or at least hints at the superiority of humans over other material beings. The initial context of the verse of trust also suggests this superiority. However, suddenly, by mentioning the difference between Adam and other beings, it seems to criticize and condemn humans. Because both qualities are derived from two negative attributes of "injustice" and "ignorance"; therefore, it seems that the verse has shifted from praising humans in the initial verses to denouncing them.

By considering "Free selection of goodness" as a criterion for human dignity and with the differentiating of wisdom and understanding from choosing, and choosing from accepting or following, which is of course interpretable to theoretical, practical and behavioral wisdom, understanding the meaning of the verse becomes clear and easy (9).

The first point we notice by examining this verse is that the trust or “Al-Amanah” must be one of the prominent characteristics of humans that create a fundamental differentiation and separation

between humans and other beings; therefore, trust in this verse is not referring to insignificant characteristics. So far, many branches of science have tried to provide a definition of human and have mentioned different characteristics as the factor that separates humans from other beings, which include wisdom, belief and free will (10-14). From these fundamental characteristics, wisdom cannot be an example of trust for three reasons. Firstly, a certain level of wisdom can also be found in other animals and is not exclusive to humans. Secondly, injustice is a value-based concept and wisdom is a value-neutral concept and in general sense, a value-neutral concept cannot be derived from a value-based concept (15). Thirdly, ignorance is the opposite of knowledge and wisdom and cannot be introduced as its cause. Among the mentioned characteristics, belief is not in accordance with the characteristics of this trust either. Because belief and acceptance are based on justice and awareness, not injustice and ignorance. Furthermore, trust is a valuable thing that needs to be protected and nurtured, but belief is the ultimate goal and the outcome of maintaining trust. In the verse after the verse of trust, hypocrites, polytheists, and faithful are mentioned as examples

of humans who have accepted the trust.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the trust in this verse is not belief, but trust can lead to belief.

Only free will is compatible with the characteristics of this trust. Because the rest of the creatures are deprived of this free will and also free will is very valuable and it can lead to the elevation of the chooser by freely choosing goodness, but it may also lead to ignorance and corruption by being rebellious against the belief of the heart and choosing badness.

#### ***Linguistic analysis:***

The words "Zaloom" (unjust) and "Jahool" (ignorant) are formed on the pattern of "FAOOL" in the Arabic language. This pattern is used to create a "similarity adjective" or an "exaggerated form"(16). A similarity adjective in the pattern of "FAOOL" is sometimes used to indicate "acceptance" in derived nouns, such as "Motavee" (acceptance) in the rhythm of "mazido-fih". From this example, we can mention "Vaghoor" (respectful), "khajool" (shy), and "Zalool" (submissive), as well as other cases that only indicate "ability"; because "Tahoor", "Rakoob", and "Laboos" mean "able to clean", "able to ride", and "able to cover", even if they have not done any

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Quran, Surah Ahzab, verse 73: Allah will surely punish the hypocrites, men and women, and the polytheists,*

*men and women, and Allah will turn clemently to the faithful, men and women, and Allah is all-forgiving, all-merciful*

cleaning, riding, or covering yet (17, 18). Based on this, "Zaloom" and "Jahool" can also be used to mean a being that has the potential for injustice and ignorance, even if they have not exhibited these qualities, and we will have to use the same pattern for expressing these qualities in humans; especially since if the intention is to express the attribute, the noun "Zalem" (unjust) and "Jahel" (ignorant) are very practical and are the first words that comes to mind, and if the intention is exaggeration, "Zollam" (very cruel) has also been used in the Quran. Therefore, translating "Zaloom" to injustice-prone and "Jahool" to ignorance-prone will add consistency to the verse in interpreting "trust" as "freewill" will explain both types of choice that could be made, namely the beauty of accepting and belief and ugliness of rebellion against one's belief. Translating them as "unjust" and "ignorant", whether as a similarity adjective or an exaggerated form, does not contradict this interpretation; but it only refers to human's disobedience and not their ability to choose and their free will, which includes both acceptance and disobedience. Disobedience is unique to humans, while acceptance exists both in humans and other creatures. Although disobedience can imply the existence of

acceptance, but this interpretation is not as strong as previous.

Based on this, the interpretation of the verse will be: God offered the "free will" to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, but they declined to bear it and were afraid of it. Other beings were afraid of the possibility of "disobedience"; therefore, they declined both free will and the possibility of the position of acceptance. Therefore, they cannot be wise and just, nor cruel and ignorant. But man undertook to bear it. Indeed, human, in search of the position of believing and worshipping God freely and according to their own will, accepted the possibility of choice and the risk of disobedience. Therefore, humans have the power to be unjust and ignorant, as they have the power to be just and wise.

With a look at the continuation of the verses that state " Allah will surely punish the hypocrites, men and women, and the polytheists, men and women, and Allah will turn clemently to the faithful, men and women, and Allah is all-forgiving, all-merciful",<sup>2</sup> we can consider hypocrisy as a consequence and manifestation of injustice, polytheism as a consequence and manifestation of ignorance, and faith as the absence of these two

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<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Quran, Surah Ahzab, verse 73*

negative qualities (18, 19). However, in the verse, in contrast to the punishment of the hypocrites and polytheists, for the believers, repentance is mentioned as a consequence not a reward, which is proof of at least some degrees of injustice and ignorance even in believers, which will be forgiven later. But even in this case, it is better to interpret Zaloom and Jahool as a potential attribute for humans and not an actual attribute, because humans, due to their ability to be unjust and ignorant, have not been entrusted with the trust, and such behavior is the precursor to betrayal and contrary to wisdom. Rather, God entrusted the trust to humans for this reason, that they have the potential for injustice and ignorance as well as justice and wisdom. Although the position of choice itself is superior to value judgment.

***B: Verse of "Caliphate/ vicegerent "***

Verse 30 of Surah Al-Baqarah says "When your Lord said to the angels, 'Indeed I am going to set a viceroy on the earth,' they said, 'Will You set in it someone who will cause corruption in it and shed blood, while we celebrate your praise and proclaim your sanctity?' He said, 'Indeed I know what you do not know.'" This verse is known as the verse of caliphate or vicegerent.

There is no more talk of "choice" here, as the angels thought, like the sky, the earth and the mountains,

"the ugliness of rebellion" appeared more important to them than the "beauty of acceptance" and protested. They evaluated their contentment with obedience and compulsory acceptance as more logical than voluntary obedience and acceptance with danger of disobedience. But the perspective of Allah was not like this, and He knew the value of something that they did not know; the conscious and voluntary obedience and acceptance that was divine and vicegerent of Allah on earth, and Allah does not turn away from this great good for the sake of avoiding a small evil.

In assessing the verses of trust and caliphate, two points must be mentioned:

Firstly, the heavens, the earth, and the mountains which were mentioned in verse of trust were neither free nor aware, and therefore, justice and injustice, wisdom and ignorance did not apply to them. However, angels, although they are not free and do not embody justice and injustice, are aware and embody wisdom and awareness. Therefore, in verse of trust, God Himself expresses the difference between humans and other creatures by mentioning the potential characteristics of injustice and ignorance, but in the verse of caliphate, the angels who are aware and knowledgeable themselves refer to acts of corruption as a result of ignorance and bloodshed as a result of injustice.

Secondly, it seems that there is also a difference between "praise" and "sanctification"; Praise is in response to creation, blessing, and abundance, while sanctification is in response to transcendence, divinity, and unity. Creation and abundance are closer to wisdom, and divinity and unity are closer to justice. Therefore, praise is mentioned for abundance and against corruption, and sanctification is mentioned for unity and against bloodshed. Bloodshed is a manifestation of self-exaltation, with injustice towards lives and interference in divinity by taking lives, which is given by God. Just as polytheism is considered an injustice<sup>3</sup> and monotheism is justice. However, corruption is the lack of knowledge of positions and functions, which is horizontal in the foundations and structure of creation, not vertical like oppression and seeking superiority. In other verses, corruption is mentioned separately from transcendence and descent: "This is the abode of the Hereafter, which we shall grant to those who do not desire to domineer in the earth nor to cause corruption, and the outcome will be in favor of the God wary"<sup>4</sup>.

In the following verses of Surah Al-Baqarah, God answers the angels by referring to the knowledge of human, which is superior to the angels, and not by referring to the justice or injustice of human:" And He taught Adam the Names, all of them; then presented them to the angels and said, 'Tell me the names of these, if you are truthful.'" They said, 'Immaculate are you! We have no knowledge except what you have taught us. Indeed, you are the All-knowing, the All-wise.' He said, 'O Adam, inform them of their names,' and when he had informed them of their names, He said, 'Did I not tell you that I know the Unseen of the heavens and the earth, and that I know whatever you disclose and whatever you conceal?'"<sup>5</sup> From this verse, it is understood that the knowledge and wisdom of the angels is not equal to that of humans, and God taught Adam names that the angels had not learned and certainly could not learn; because if they could, there would be no superiority of human over them (20).

Therefore, it can be said that instead of directly answering the question of the angels, God rejected the subject of the question by stating that your sanctification is not as conscious as Adam's, so it

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<sup>3</sup> *Holy Quran, Surah Luqman, verse 13: When Luqman said to his son, as he advised him: 'O my son! Do not ascribe any partners to Allah. Polytheism is indeed a great injustice.*

<sup>4</sup> *Holy Quran, Surah Ghesas, verse 83*

<sup>5</sup> *Holy Quran, Surah Baqarah, verse 31-33*

cannot replace conscious worship of humans and make the universe needless of patience for the rebelliousness of man.

The current state is not clear about what the knowledge of names was and who those who had the names were. However, the verse provides some indications:

One indication is that names have been referred to by human/intellectual pronouns, although these pronouns are used in mixed cases of humans and non-humans as well. Nevertheless, all or at least some of the name bearers are intelligent.

What no one has paid attention before is that the "names" in this verse are the main topic and not that they are the way to reach the named ones. It means that God taught Adam the "names" and not that He Himself introduced the owners of these names to humans, and God asked the angels their names, and not whether you know these people or not.

In Shia narrations, these mentioned name bearers are also considered divine authorities (21). If we add this narration to the belief in the infallibility of divine authorities from one side and the objection of angels to corruption and bloodshed from the other side, it will lead to the conclusion that Adam named the pure ones before the angels by God's instruction and command to be a counterexample of their objection.

Here a question arises: if the angels saw the lowliness and bloodshed of humans, how could they remain unaware of the pure examples of humans? An answer to this question requires deep contemplation, which leads to the second indication of names in the verse.

What the angels were unaware of was the "names of those" and it is not mentioned that the angels were unaware of the existence of them (22).

Based on this assumption and interpretation, the angels were aware of the existence of those name bearers, but they did not know their names.

Since contract is defined as a written or spoken agreement, Naming could be considered as a type of contract. One of the important topics in psychology, philosophy, and philosophy of mind is the discussion of "contracting". Humans can perceive "contracts" beyond "sensation", "perception", and even beyond abstraction. Making a contract and understanding it, is a distinct human characteristic, and naming occurs in this foundation. It seems that the angels were incapable of this foundation; therefore, they did not have the ability to learn the names, meaning they did not have an understanding of contracting. Most ancient interpreters did not delve into the concept of "name" in this verse and interpreted it as simply naming objects and individuals, or at most, as an



expression of the true attributes of beings, this definition stems from the concept of "abstraction", which could not be a distinct and indicative feature of human superiority over angels whom probably also poses the ability to think abstractly. Opposing commentators of these interpreters have also mentioned the possibility of angels having knowledge and wisdom, but they have not been able to provide an explanation for how angels were unaware of "names" and the reason for their importance. Because contracts are the tool for knowledge/perception of values and at the same time address both the unjust and ignorant aspects of humans.

Based on this assumption, angels fundamentally did not perceive the "nominal" status of the pure ones in order to distinguish between them and evildoers. They considered any material behavior and worldly interference as a deviation from worship of God and in contrast to glorification and sanctification. Meanwhile, even the pure ones were obligated to mix in the world and engage in marriage, business, wars, etc. Angels did not understand the values born out of material interference. They considered value only as the result of "abstraction" from worship, specifically, such as "Glorification" and "Sanctification".

God's pointing to this inherent deficiency of angels and the lack of understanding of such human concepts made angels realize that their praise and sanctification, although valuable, is not in the same status of humans, and that humans, whether righteous or unjust, have the ability to reach to that position or status, and human's justice and injustice in that status occurs with free choice and after having knowledge of the subject and is not blind or inevitable.

Therefore, understanding the value-based contracts with the ability of free choice turns human action like God; except that it is possible for evil to be chosen by human. But if acceptance and obedience to truth and goodness is done consciously and freely, and justice is practiced and harmonized with God's behavior, then one becomes godlike and God's representative and vicegerent on earth and made them worthy of being prostrated by angels. In a divine hadith, it is also mentioned: "Obey me until I make you like myself" (23). Humans are both unjust and ignorant and just and knowledgeable at the same time. This is the exclusive nature of human's worship of God, which is freely chosen like God's action, and angels could not be like this; therefore, it is said: "Servitude is a gem whose mite is divine" and the most important foundation of human dignity (24).

Because of this change in position of humans, the next verse begins like this: "And when we said to the angels, 'Prostrate to Adam'; so, they prostrated".

***Conclusion:***

The verses trust and Caliphate have a cohesive and illuminating meaning and effectively convey the Islamic perspective on human dignity, as stated in the verse dignity. Injustice and ignorance are characteristics that can lead to corruption and bloodshed. The angels, not understanding the names, considered these characteristics inevitable and always ugly due to their consequences.

However, human understanding of moral values and free choice, which are God's trust, will result in humans becoming God's caliphate by accepting truth and justice.

***Acknowledgment:***

Unfortunately, Dr. seyed abdosaleh Jafari, the first author of this article, passed away shortly after writing and submitting this article.

***Conflict of interest:***

The author declares no conflict of interests.

***Funding Statement:***

The study was conducted using no financial fund.

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<sup>6</sup> *Holy Quran, Surah Baqarah, verse 34*

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