

The Hadith of Jibra'il and 'Ilm al-Ghayb

Question: It is the belief of the Ahlus Sunnah that Allah, may He be glorified, imparted upon His dear Messenger Muhammad (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam) all the knowledge of the first and the last, meaning from the beginning of creation to the Day of Judgement. The Wahabis hold a belief different to this and present the Hadith of Jibra'il (Bukhari 1:47) as proof. If Rasoolallah (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam) knew the unseen then he would have answered Jibra'il (when Jibra'il asked when is the hour) the way he answered the other questions. The question was not answered, though Rasoolallah (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam) did not openly say, "I do not know". Rasoolallah (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam) answered the question by reciting a verse from the Holy Qur'an which implies that only Allah knows the knowledge of five specific things (Qur'an 31:34). This shows that Rasoolallah (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam) did not have 'Ilm al-Ghayb.

Answer: Replying "ma al-mas'ool 'anha a'lamu min as-saa'il" (The answerer has no better knowledge than the questioner) to the question "mataa as-saa'ah" (When will the Hour be established?) does not mean, "I do not know". If this was the case, then Rasoolallah (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam) would simply have replied "laa a'lamu" (I do not know).

It should be known that not answering a question does not mean that the person answering does not know the answer. For instance, when Allah, the Almighty, was asked "ahillah" (They ask you concerning the new moons), its reply of "They are times appointed for (the benefit of) men" is certainly not answering the question. This is because the question that was asked was of no value; hence, the answer that is given by Allah is of use to the questioners. By analogy, the same situation is found in the questioning of Jibra'il.

The ahadith are explanations of one another. In another incident, a person came to Rasoolallah (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam) and asked, "When is Qiyamah?" Rasoolallah (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam) replied "If you have prepared for it then what have you to fear?" Rasoolallah (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam) did not answer his question, instead, he replied in a way which was useful to the questioner.

Also, Rasoolallah (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam) not answering the question is not a proof against my claim that Rasoolallah (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam) knows the unseen. This is because I have never claimed that Rasoolallah (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam) had knowledge of the unseen from birth. So, Rasoolallah (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam) not knowing something is not proof that he will never know it. As the Qur'an says, "We have sent down to thee the Book explaining all things" (16:89) which means that the knowledge of Rasoolallah (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam) increased day by day and when the revelation of the Qur'an was complete, so was the knowledge of Rasoolallah (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam). However, this does not mean his knowledge reached its limit and stopped increasing. It means that the total knowledge of the Sacred Tablet (lawh al-mahfooz), everything small and big, every wet and dry and the minutest details of all

things were made known to him (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam).

Someone may argue that “laa ya’lamuhunna” grammatically refers to both the present and future tenses and Rasoolallah (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam) did not say “qad laa ya’lamuhunna” which refers only to the present (meaning I do not know now but I may do in future).

The answer to this is that if Rasoolallah (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam) meant that I will never know and only Allah can know, then this will cause major difficulties. This is because the rank of Rasoolallah (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam) is the loftiest, higher than any creation. When his companion, Sayyiduna Abu Bakr as-Siddeeq (radiyallahu ta'ala anhu), neared his demise, his advice to his daughter Sayyida Aisha (radiyallahu ta'ala anha) was that his wealth is for her two brothers and two sisters. She was confused because she knew she had two brothers but how did she have two sisters? Sayyiduna Abu Bakr (radiyahallhu ta'ala anhu) mentioned the name of his wife said that she is pregnant which will result in a girl being born eventhough this is against the very specific verse, “He knows what is in the wombs” (Qur’an 31:34). Abu Bakr as Siddeeq, was neither a magician nor a mesmerist or astronomer. So, when Abu Bakr had the knowledge then why is it so hard for Rasoolallah (sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam)? So, present knowledge is meant and not future knowledge, otherwise it will be necessary to believe that Allah has lied.

The Ahlus Sunnah believe all the verses of the Qur’an are the truth and to believe in them all is obligatory. From this general rule it is found that the Ahlus Sunnah are upon the truth.

(This answer has been translated by Muhammad Aqdas from Mufti Zafar ad-Din al-Bihari al-Ridawi’s (rahimahullah) collection of fatawa ‘Naafi’il bashar fee fatawa zafar’. Mufti Zafar ad-Din was one of the foremost students of Imam Ahmad Rida Khan Barelwi (rahimahullah), the greatest scholar of the 20th century).