



Ma'rifah: Being Acquainted with Allah

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When we compare our lifespans wherein our endeavors unfold to the age of the earth, or to that of the universe which we are told is fifteen thousand million years old, they seem of less significance than a droplet of water in an endless ocean. For today's materialist, life holds little significance other than that of consumption and seeking instant gratification. To believers in God and His Divine Unity, however, life is seen as a rich tapestry of signs, and as an arena of tests, that afford us the opportunity of knowing Allah and worshipping Him: *"I created men and jinn, avers Allah in the Qur'an, only that they may worship Me."*¹

Early Qur'anic exegesists have cited Ibn 'Abbās, and his illustrious student, Mujāhid, as saying that Allah's words: 'that they may worship Me' - *illā li ya'budūn*, actually mean: "that they may know Me - *illā li ya'rifūn*."² The reason for this is quite straightforward, which is that we cannot worship Allah without first knowing Him. This is why it has been said:

*Awwalu wājibin 'ala'l-'abidi
Ma'rifatu'Llābi bi'l-tawhīdi*

Meaning, "that the first duty upon a person is to know Allah vis-a-via His Oneness and Divinity."³

“THAT YOU MAY KNOW”

In his essay on Divine love and intimacy, Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī wrote: "Allah created creation so that they may worship Him through love, fear and hope of Him. Allah, Exalted is He, strictured: *"I created jinn and men only that they may worship Me."* However, Allah can only be worshiped by possessing knowledge (*ma'rifah*) of Him;

which is why He created the heavens and the earth, and all that is between them, as an indicator to His divinity and majesty. About this, Allah proclaims: *Allah it is who has created seven heavens, and of the earth a similar number. His command descends through them, so that you may know Allah has power over all things, and that He encompasses all things in knowledge.*⁴⁵ Here we are told that creation was created *li ta'lamū* - 'that you may know' Allah, and that His Command courses through the creation, and that His omnipotence and His omniscience envelop all things.

Commenting on the above verse, Imam al-Sa'dī writes of the creation that, "All of this was [created] in order for people to know and to discern that His knowledge and power circumscribe each and everything. As they come to know Him through His Beautiful Names and Sublime Attributes, they will then adore and worship Him, and also fulfill His rights. This is the greater purpose behind the creation and command: to know Allah and to then worship Him."⁶

THE OCEAN OF MA'RIFAH: SHALLOW & DEEP

In explaining the hadith: "Know Allah in times of prosperity and He will know you in times of adversity,"⁷ Ibn Rajab writes about *ma'rifah*, or knowing Allah:

"A servant's *ma'rifah* of his Lord is of two levels: Firstly, a general acquaintance which involves acknowledging, affirming and having faith in Him: this type of *ma'rifah* is common to all believers. Secondly, a deeper type of *ma'rifah*, or acquaintance, which leads to hearts being totally inclined to Allah: devoted to Him; intimate with Him; at peace when remembering Him; being shy of

Him; and being held in awe of Him. This is the specific type of *ma'rifab* around which the gnostics, or *'arifin*, revolve - as one of them remarked: "The poor people of this world have departed from it without experiencing the most delightful thing in it." He was asked: What is the most delightful of things? He said: "The *ma'rifab* of Allah, Mighty and Majestic is He." Ahmad ibn 'Āsim al-Anṭāqī said: "I desire not to die until I attain *ma'rifab* of my Lord. I do not mean *ma'rifab* in the sense of merely believing in Him; but a *ma'rifab* so that, when I know Him, I feel shy of Him."⁸

MA'RIFAH: A METAPHOR

These levels of *ma'rifab* can be likened to the example of a man and a neighbour who has just recently moved in across the road.⁹ At first he becomes acquainted with his new neighbour in a general sense. He may learn of his name, his vocation, whether he is married with kids; he will also learn of his general appearance and be able to recognise him when meeting him on the street. He may well, by asking around, be able to glean other facts about his new neighbour. Yet whatever information he learns about him will be at an indirect, impersonal level; unlikely to stir the heart into having any deep sense of respect or admiration for the neighbour. Indeed, beyond acknowledging the neighbour's existence and presence in the locality, his outlook towards him may possibly be one of polite indifference. This is akin to the first level of *ma'rifab* spoken of by Ibn Rajab.

Let us now suppose that he decides to know his neighbour directly and introduces himself to him; visits him frequently; socialises with him; and, over time, forms a sincere and faithful friendship with him. He is now able to observe and experience at first hand his neighbour's fine character: his kindness, generosity, knowledge and wisdom, compassion, and other virtues that can only be known through direct contact. This intimate knowledge of his neighbour evokes in the man a profound respect and admiration for his neighbour, and a deep and abiding love for him. What's more, it is probable - guaranteed even - that his neighbour will begin to disclose to him many of his most private thoughts, and share with him many of his most intimate feelings, which could never have been known even in a lifetime's worth of indirect observation or investigation. Instead, such knowledge is

only granted to him out of the neighbour's desire to be more intimately known, and out of the man abiding by the rules of propriety (*adab*) in seeking to know and to draw closer to his neighbour. This reflects the second degree of *ma'rifab* discussed by Ibn Rajab. No wonder, then, that the *ma'rifab* of Allah has been described as 'the most delightful of things' on this earth.

A TREASURE UNKNOWN

As for the hadith frequently cited in Sufi literature: "I was a treasure unknown but wanted to be known, so I created creation and made Myself known; they then knew Me," hadith masters have declared this narration to be a chainless forgery.

In his dictionary of fabricated hadiths, Mullā 'Alī al-Qārī states: "Ibn Taymiyyah said: 'This is not a saying of the Prophet, peace be upon him, nor is it known to have a chain of transmission; be it sound or weak.' Al-Zirkashī and al-'Asqalānī said the same. Its meaning, however, is sound, taking its cue from Allah's words: "*I created jinn and men only that they may worship Me*," meaning "that they may know Me" - as explained by Ibn 'Abbās, may Allah be pleased with him."¹⁰

NURTURING MA'RIFAH

Ibn al-Qayyim has noted: "In the Qur'an, Allah, Exalted is He, invites people to acquire *ma'rifab*; or knowledge and gnosis [of Him], via two ways: Firstly, by reflecting upon the divine handiwork [in creation]; and secondly, by contemplating over the Qur'an and pondering over its meanings. The former are His signs that are seen and witnessed, the latter are His signs which are heard and understood.

"The first type is referred to in His saying: *In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the night and day; in the sailing of ships through the ocean for the benefit of mankind; in the water that Allah sends down from the sky and with which He revives the earth after its death; in the animals of all kinds that He has scattered therein; in the ordering of the winds and the clouds that are driven between heaven and earth, are signs for people who can think.*¹¹ And His words: *In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the alternation of the night and day, are signs for those of*

understanding.¹² Verses like these occur frequently in the Qur'an. The second is referred to in His saying: *Will they not reflect on the Qur'an?*¹³ As well as: *Do they not reflect about what is being said?*¹⁴ And: *This is a Book that We have sent down to you, full of blessings, that they may reflect over its signs.*¹⁵ Such verses also occur frequently.¹⁶

Another way by which *ma'rifab* is nurtured in the heart is by engaging in divine remembrance, or *dhikr*. Ibn al-Qayyim said of *dhikr*: "It opens to a person the greatest door to *ma'rifab*. Hence, as his remembrance [of Allah] increases so does his *ma'rifab*."¹⁷ Amidst the dramas of this world, therefore, and amidst its songs of sorrow and joy, the Qur'an asks the human creature to know their Maker and to remember Him, and to live out their lives in conscious awareness of Him.

ALLAH'S MA'RIFAH OF US

Having dwelt upon the need for, and nature of, seeking *ma'rifab* of Allah, Ibn Rajab then says: "Allah's *ma'rifab* of His servants is also of two degrees: A general awareness, which refers to His knowledge of His servants and His awareness of all that they do: whether done openly or secretly. Allah said: *We created man, and We know the promptings of his soul, and We are closer to him than his jugular vein.*¹⁸ And He informs: *He knows you best since He created you from the earth, and when you were embryos your mothers' wombs.*¹⁹ Secondly, a particular type of *ma'rifab* which leads to His love for His servant; His drawing closer to him; His responding to his prayer; and His delivering him from trials and hardships. This is expressed in the Prophet's words, peace be upon him; who relates from his Lord: "My servant continues to draw closer to Me with superogatory works so that I shall love him. When I love him I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks. Were he to ask something of Me, I would surely give it to him; and were he to seek refuge in Me, I would surely grant it to him."²⁰ In another wording: "... Were he to call on Me, I would surely respond to him."²¹

Thus those who worship Allah upon such *ma'rifab*, and in accordance with the Sacred Law (*sbari'ab*), are led by it to an even deeper gnosis or *ma'rifab*. And so it is that

Allah, in His overwhelming grace, raises those who are imperfect and ignorant, yet strive to subdue their lower selves; open their hearts to His light; and seek to know and draw closer to Him.

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END NOTES

1. Qur'an 51:56.
2. Cf. al-Baghawī, *Ma'ālim al-Tanzīl* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2002), 1236. After citing these words, al-Baghawī remarks: "This is the best [of what has been said]; for had He not created them, they would never have known of His existence or divinity." Also cf. al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li Ahkām al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1996) 17:38; and Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Qur'ān al-'Azīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1987), 4:255.
3. Cf. al-Safārīnī, *Lawāmi' al-Anwār al-Babiyyah* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1991), 1:112.
4. Qur'an 65:12
5. *Istinsbāq Nasīm al-Uns*, 60.
6. Al-Sa'dī, *Taysīr al-Karīm al-Raḥmān fī Tafsīr Kalām al-Mannān* (Riyadh: Dār al-Mughni, 1999), 955.
7. Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 1:293; al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, no.2516. Shu'ayb al-Arnā'ūṭ declared its chain to be authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) in his verification to Ibn Rajab, *Jāmi' al-'Ulūm wa'l-Ḥikam* (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risālah, 1998), 1:459-60.
8. *Jāmi' al-'Ulūm wa'l-Ḥikam*, 1:473.
9. The metaphor is culled from Sayyid Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1998), 80-81. I am indebted to Shaykh Muhammad al-Afifi for pointing this book out to me.
10. *Al-Asrār al-Marfū'ab fī'l-Akbbār al-Mawdū'ab* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1986), no.353.
- Similar verdicts occur in al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durar al-Muntalibirab* (Riyadh: Riyadh University, 1983), no.330; al-Sakhāwī, *Maqāṣid al-Ḥasanah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah), no.836.
11. Qur'an 2:164.
12. Qur'an 3:190.
13. Qur'an 4:84.
14. Qur'an 23:68.
15. Qur'an 38:29.
16. *Al-Fawā'id* (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Rushd, 2001), 42-3.
17. *Al-Wābil al-Ṣayyib min al-Kalīm al-Tayyib* (Cairo: Dār al-Rayyān, 1987), 62.
18. Qur'an 50:16.
19. Qur'an 53: 32.
20. Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no.6502. This is the last portion of a famous hadith, which begins: "Allah, Mighty and Majestic is He, said: Whoever shows enmity to a friend of Mine, I shall be at war with him. My servant does not draw closer to Me with anything more beloved to Me than the religious duties I have enjoined on him. My servant continues ..."
21. *Jāmi' al-'Ulūm wa'l-Ḥikam*, 1:473-4.