

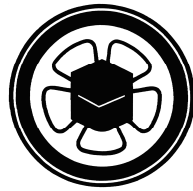


STEPS

SHI'I THEOLOGY, ETHICS
AND PRACTICE SERIES

‘Ilm al-Ghayb

KNOWLEDGE OF
THE UNSEEN



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In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Compassionate

SYNOPSIS

ONE OF THE ISSUES which Muslim theologians over the centuries have debated – and that is the breadth of knowledge which the Prophets, Messengers, Imams and Saints (*al-Awliya'*) possess. Where does it come from, and how and when are they permitted to make use of it? The term that has been coined for this special knowledge is *'ilm al-ghayb* – which literally means *'knowledge of the unseen.'* This article seeks to better understand the roots of this discussion; review who amongst the creations of Allah have been privileged with *knowledge of the unseen*; how are they are endowed with it; and how does it compare to the knowledge of Allah?

Introduction

In the language of the Quran and the *ahadith*, the term *ghayb* refers to something that is hidden which the creations of Allah are prevented from knowing through conventional means. In essence, all matters are known solely to Allah, however in His discretion, He may share some of that knowledge to whomsoever He pleases to give it to (as is seen in Ayatul Kursi: "...and they encompass nothing of His knowledge (of the things) except such (things) as He (Himself) pleases (to tell))." From the scope of *ghayb*, the clearest example that we have is the Quran itself – a Book which Allah has shared with His creation. Therefore, *knowledge of the unseen* is actually of two types:

1. That which is known through learning via our five senses, and through the use of our intellect - as is mentioned in the Quran in Surah al-Nahl (Chapter 16), verse 78: "And Allah brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers, while you did not know anything; and He gave you ears, eyes and hearts [the power of the intellect], so that you might give (Him) thanks."
2. That which is only known by Allah, and this is divided into two categories:

- a. That which Allah gives to His chosen ones - religious truths, events which will transpire in the future, and other information of *the unseen*.
- b. That which is specific to Allah which no one else can EVER know, and He will never grant - such as knowledge of His Divine Essence.

The Quran and *Knowledge of the Unseen*

The Quran contains over 50 verses which speak about *knowledge of the unseen*. Almost 40% of them describe Allah as being the sole *Knower of the unseen*; however, approximately 30% confirm that some people who have a special rank with Allah, are on occasion, given limited access to certain things.

Knowledge Reserved for Allah

There seems to be a contradiction in the Quranic verses regarding *knowledge of the unseen*, so let us first review a few of the verses¹ which limit the *knowledge of the unseen* to Allah only, and then review some of the verses which permit humanity to have limited access.

﴿قُلْ لَا يَعْلَمُ مَنْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ الْغَيْبَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَمَا يَشْعُرُونَ أَيَّانَ يُبْعَثُونَ ﴿٦٥﴾﴾

Say: 'No one in the heavens or the earth knows the unseen except Allah, and they are not aware when they will be resurrected.'²

This verse indicates that other than Allah, no one – whether they reside in 'the heavens' or 'on earth' knows the unseen, nor are they aware of when they will be brought back to life again for the accountability in the presence of Allah.

Another example, and perhaps one of the strongest verses in the Quran which negates *knowledge of the unseen* for other than Allah is found in Surah Luqman:

﴿إِنَّ اللَّهَ عِنْدَهُ عِلْمُ السَّاعَةِ وَيُنزِلُ الْغَيْثَ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا فِي الْأَرْحَامِ وَمَا تَدْرِي نَفْسٌ مَّاذَا تَكْسِبُ غَدًا وَمَا تَدْرِي نَفْسٌ بِأَيِّ أَرْضٍ تَمُوتُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ ﴿٢٣﴾﴾

¹ All translations of the Quran have been taken from the on-line translation of Sayyid Ali Quli Qarai found at www.al-quran.info.

² *Quran*, Surah al-Naml (27), verse 65.

Indeed the knowledge of the Hour is with Allah; He sends down the rain, and He knows what is in the wombs. No soul knows what it will earn tomorrow, and no soul knows in what land it will die. Indeed Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware.³

This verse indicates that there are at least five pieces of hidden (*ghaybi*) knowledge which Allah has reserved only for Himself:

1. The hour (when the end of this world will take place);
2. The rain which He sends down (when, where and how much...);
3. That which is in the womb of a woman and all of its specifics;
4. What each and every person will earn (how, when, and how much...);
5. Where each person will die (when, where, and how).

However, it should be noted that this verse only indicates that Allah alone knows these things, it does not state that He will not share this knowledge if He so chooses with certain individuals. If they require such knowledge to complete their mission, then He will grant it to them accordingly.

Other than these two verses, there are other ones which indicate that there are specific types of knowledge which Allah reserves for Himself alone.³

Knowledge of the Unseen – Given to Prophet Muhammad (s)

There are many verses⁴ in the Quran which confirm that Allah has provided Prophet Muhammad (s) with some knowledge from the unseen realm.

In relation to the story of Maryam binte ‘Imran (‘a) and the events leading up to the birth of Prophet ‘Isa (‘a), Allah tells Prophet Muhammad (s):

﴿ذَلِكَ مِنْ أَنْبَاءِ الْغَيْبِ نُوحِيهِ إِلَيْكَ وَمَا كُنْتَ لَدَيْهِمْ إِذْ يُلْقُونَ أَقْلَامَهُمْ أَيُّهُمْ يَكْفُلُ مَرْيَمَ وَمَا كُنْتَ لَدَيْهِمْ إِذْ يَخْتَصِمُونَ﴾

These accounts are from the *unseen*, which We reveal to you [O Muhammad (s)], and you were not with them when they were casting lots [to see] which of them would take

³ See *Quran*: 2:33, 6:73, 9:4, 10:20, 11:123, 13:9, 16:77, 18:26, 23:92, 27:65, 32:6, 34:3, 35:38, 39:46, 49:18, 59:22, 62:8, 64:18, 5:109, 5:116, 9:78, and 34:48.

⁴ See *Quran*: 54:45, 30:1-2, 2:142-144, 48:27, 66:3, 58:8, 17:60, 5:54, and 48:28.

charge of Maryam's care, nor were you with them when they (the Bani Isra'il scholars) were contending (in order to gain honour of caring for her).⁵

In addition, Allah also declares that He has taught Prophet Muhammad (s) the Quran and that this is a Book which the Prophet (s) did not know, nor was he capable of ever knowing independently without Allah revealing it to him:

﴿... وَأَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَعَلَّمَكَ مَا لَمْ تَكُن تَعْلَمُ وَكَانَ فَضْلُ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكَ عَظِيمًا ﴿١١٣﴾﴾

...Allah has sent down to you [O Muhammad (s)] the Book and wisdom, and He taught you what you did not know (and could not ever know), and great is Allah's grace upon you.⁶

Knowledge of the Unseen – Other Prophets

Many other verses⁷ in the Quran attest that other Prophets – at least eleven – have been recipients of *knowledge of the unseen* – Prophets such as: Adam, Nuh, Ibrahim, Lut, Ya'qub, Yusuf, Salih, Dawud, Sulayman, 'Isa and Prophet Muhammad – prayers of Allah be upon all of them.

Knowledge of the Unseen – Non-Prophets

The Quran is emphatic that even non-Messengers received *knowledge of the unseen*, and this has been mentioned in at least six⁸ instances, of which one states:

﴿إِذْ قَالَتِ الْمَلَايِكَةُ يَا مَرْيَمُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُبَشِّرُكِ بِكَلِمَةٍ مِّنْهُ اسْمُهُ الْمَسِيحُ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ وَجِيهًا فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ وَمِنَ الْمُقَرَّبِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾ وَيُكَلِّمُ النَّاسَ فِي الْمَهْدِ وَكَهْلًا وَمِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾﴾

(Recall) When the angels said, 'O Maryam, Allah gives you the good news of a Word from Him whose name is Masih, 'Isa, son of Maryam, distinguished in the world and the

⁵ Quran, Surah Al 'Imran (3), verse 44.

⁶ Quran, Surah al-Nisa' (4), verse 113.

⁷ See Quran: 3:44 3:129, 6:50, 6:59, 7:188, 9:105, 11:31, 11:49, 12:102, 19:78, 34:14, 52:41, 53:35, 68:47, 72:26, and 81:24 for more examples.

⁸ See Quran: 11:71-2, 18:62-80, 18:98, 27:38-40.

Hereafter, and one of those brought near [to Allah]. He will speak to the people from the cradle and in adulthood, and will be one of the righteous ones.’⁹

In this passage, Allah reveals to Prophet Muhammad (s) how the blessed Maryam (‘a) was given *knowledge of the unseen* about the birth of her child, and she was told that she will deliver a boy; what his name will be; plus she was informed about his great spiritual rank in this world and in the next; and she was told about some of the miracles which he will perform. Keep in mind that Maryam (‘a) was not a Prophet, Messenger or an Imam, however Allah shows us that when He deems it appropriate, He provides *knowledge of the unseen* to those whom He chooses to receive this special gift.

In addition to the examples in the Quran, there are multiple other instances¹⁰ contained in the sermons of Imam ‘Ali (‘a) in which he conveyed some hidden or future knowledge to his companions. Below, we will present one example.

When Imam ‘Ali (‘a) foretold some future events, one of his companions said to him [perhaps doubting how a mortal can know the unseen]: “O Commander of the Faithful! You have been given knowledge of hidden things?!” The Commander of the Faithful laughed [not out of pride or mockery but glad for the opportunity to explain the truth about this matter] and said to the man who belonged to the tribe of Banu Kalb: “O brother of Kalb! This is not knowledge of hidden things (*ilm al-ghayb*). Rather, these are matters which have been acquired from him [Prophet Muhammad (s)] who knew them. As regards to the *knowledge of the unseen*, that means knowledge of the Day of Judgement, and the things covered by Allah in the verse: ‘Verily, Allah is He with Whom is the knowledge of the Hour; He sends down the rain, and He knows what is in the wombs. No soul knows what it will earn tomorrow, and no soul knows in what land it will die.’ (Quran, 31:34) Therefore, Allah alone knows what is there in the wombs - whether male or female, ugly or handsome, generous or miserly, mischievous or pious, and who will be the fuel for Hell, and who will be in the company of the Prophets in Paradise. This is the knowledge of the hidden things which is not known to anyone other than Allah. Everything else is that knowledge which Allah passed on to His Prophet and he passed it on to me, and prayed for me that my heart may retain it and my ribs may hold it.”

⁹ *Quran*, Surah Al ‘Imran (3), verses 45-6.

¹⁰ See *Nahj al-Balagha*: Sermons 93, 106, 158 which mention the fate of the Banu Umayya; Sermon 156 in which the Imam quotes the Noble Prophet (s) who foretold about the future sedition (*fitna*) in the community (*ummah*); Sermon 156 in which the Prophet (s) explained to the Imam why he did not attain martyrdom in the battle of Uhud because he was ‘destined’ to fight in the future against the *nakithin*, *qasitin* and *mariqin*.

An Important Question about *Knowledge of the Unseen*

If the Prophets and the Imams have *knowledge of the unseen*, or at least they have been given access to tap into the reservoir which holds such knowledge, then why did they not make use of it? If Imam ‘Ali (‘a) had this knowledge and knew that Ibn Muljim would attack him on the 19th of Ramadhan 40 AH in the Masjid of al-Kufa, resulting in his martyrdom, then why did he not act upon this knowledge before the event occurred and imprison him beforehand?

In response to such questions, Ayatullah Jawadi Amuli (b. May 5, 1933) replies:

Even though the infallible Imam has access to *knowledge of the unseen* by the permission of Allah, this does not mean that the Imams are obligated to act upon this knowledge that they have been granted ... the fact that the Commander of the Faithful knew on which night he would be attacked and that he still went to the *masjid*; the fact that Imam Hasan al-Mujtaba knew what was in the pot when he drank it (the poison which his wife used to kill him); or that Imam Husayn knew what was going to transpire on the day of ‘Ashura’ and yet he still went towards Kerbala - are things that they had to do ... the wisdom of Allah dictates that the Prophet and the Infallibles, just like all others, be tested in the life of this world ... they must also feel pain, be injured and killed. If they were permitted to make use of the *knowledge of the unseen* in their own personal lives, then they would never have faced defeat and loss. However it must be noted that on rare occasions, in order to safeguard the religion and ensure its honour is maintained, they did make use of *knowledge of the unseen*...¹¹

Lastly, we quote a statement from Ayatullah Ja’far Subhani (b. April 8, 1929) on this topic:

The Infallibles are leaders and role-models for the rest of humanity, and therefore they must live a life such that they can be emulated. If the Prophet or Imams were to resolve the challenges in life through tapping into the *knowledge of the unseen* and make use of this miraculous form of guidance, then how could the people take them as role-models in their lives, and how could these illustrious personalities ever encourage us to patience, fortitude and struggle?! One who has been equipped with the weapon of the *knowledge of the unseen* which other people have not been given, and continuously uses this to their

¹¹ *A Summary of Questions and Answers of University Students in the Presence of Ayatullah Jawadi Amuli*, Summer 1385.

advantage can never be a role-model for other people to follow as they would not share in the sadness, difficulties and tragedies which the masses encounter...¹²

The Clearest Evidence

Surah al-Jinn (Chapter 72) contains the most explicit proof that *knowledge of the unseen* is available to certain individuals, where Allah says:

﴿عَالِمُ الْغَيْبِ فَلَا يُظْهِرُ عَلَىٰ غَيْبِهِ أَحَدًا ۚ إِلَّا مَنِ ارْتَضَىٰ مِنْ رَسُولٍ فَإِنَّهُ يَسْلُكُ مِنْ بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ وَمِنْ خَلْفِهِ رَصَدًا﴾¹³

Knower of the Unseen (*'alim al-ghayb*), He does not disclose His Unseen to anyone, except to an apostle He approves of. Then He dispatches a sentinel before and behind him.¹³

The “exception” (the word *إِلَّا*) mentioned in this verse, clearly shows that sometimes, Allah grants a portion of this *knowledge of the unseen* to His chosen Messengers.¹⁴

How to Reconcile Between the Apparent Contradictions

When we read the verses of the Quran and the *ahadith* on this topic, there seems to be a contradiction in that some of the texts refute *knowledge of the unseen* for the creations, while others affirm it for certain individuals. How do we resolve such apparent inconsistencies?

1. The verses of the Quran and the traditions which mention that *knowledge of the unseen* belong exclusively to Allah refers to a specific knowledge which is reserved for Allah alone, however there is *knowledge of the unseen* which the Prophets, Imams and Awliya' have access to – by the permission of Allah.
2. The scope of the knowledge of Allah is active - He knows everything at every instance without having to be taught; however the knowledge of His creations is acquired - when they need or

¹² Subhani, Ja'far, *The Third Consciousness ('Ilm-e Ghayb: Agahi Sevom)*, pp. 255-70.

¹³ *Quran*, Surah al-Jinn (72), verses 26-27.

¹⁴ For further details on the commentary of this verse, see *Exegesis of the Noble Quran*, written by Ayatullah Nasir Makarim Shirazi and translated by Saleem Bhimji, co-published by the Islamic Publishing House (www.iph.ca) and Islamic Humanitarian Service (www.al-haqq.com).

want to know something from the hidden realms, and if Allah permits it, then they are given access to it.

Concluding Points

1. Essentially, all knowledge is based in the realm of *the unseen* – things which are unknown to the human being, however are ‘present’ around them.
2. The *knowledge of the unseen* which Allah gives to His creations is limited, and He keeps certain pieces of knowledge to Himself alone.
3. The Prophets, Messengers, Imams and Awliya’ have “limited” knowledge, and they only have access to this *knowledge of the unseen* when Allah permits it.