

Covid-19 and the Qur'an "Science and Scripture"

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Abstract: This article considers the Covid-19 pandemic in the light of the Qur'anic vision and the Prophet's teachings, as well as the principles of Shari'a and the history of Islamic medicine. Covid is part of God's creation and works according to God's *sunan* (laws) for the universe, which are unchangeable.

The Qur'an teaches people to avoid destroying themselves with their own hands.

Thus the hadith of the Prophet teaches people to avoid spreading infection/plague from one place to another.

If someone does become ill the Qur'an teaches them to have a positive attitude of trying their utmost to find a cure. The prophet said, that God had not created a disease without creating a cure. When everything possible to us has been done, the believer should not despair of God's mercy or feel helpless. The Qur'an encourages a positive frame of mind and acceptance, knowing that the sick and dying can still hope for a better life in the next world, and that God is the one who gives and takes life.

Key words: Covid-19, medicine, sickness, plague, cure, prophetic medicine, infection, pandemic.

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كوفيد-١٩ والقرآن الكريم «العلم والكتاب»

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المستخلص: يتناول هذا البحث جائزة كوفيد-١٩ على ضوء الكتاب وتعاليم السنة النبوية والشريعة وكذلك تاريخ الطب الإسلامي. يعتبر فيروس كورونا مخلوق من مخلوقات الله وتجري عليه سنن الله سبحانه في الكون وهي سنن لا تتغير. يُعلم القرآن الناس ألا يؤدوا بأنفسهم إلى التهلكة. وعليه فالحديث الشريف يُعلم الناس اجتناب نقل العدوى من مكان إلى مكان.

إذا مرض أحدنا، فالإسلام يحثه على أن يكون موقفه إيجابياً بالبحث والاجتهاد ليجد دواءً لمرضه. وقد قال الرسول عليه الصلاة والسلام فيما معناه أن الله ما أنزل داءً الا أنزل معه دواء. فعندما نبذل قصارى جهدنا في التداوي لا ينبغي للمسلم أن ييأس من رحمة الله. فالقرآن يحث على التفكير الإيجابي والقبول ومعرفة أن المريض والمحتضر يظلان يأملان في حياة أفضل في الآخرة وأن الله وحده يحيي ويميت.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كوفيد ١٩، طب، مَرَض، وَبَاء، شَفَاء، الطَّب النبوي، إِصَابَةٌ بِمَرَض، جائحة.

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COVID-19 AND THE QUR'AN: Introduction

In early 2020 the rapid transmission of coronavirus and the devastating impact of Covid-19 took the world by surprise: coronavirus spread to all parts of the world, with Covid-19 causing fatalities in a manner unprecedented in recent history. In spite of humanity's advances in medicine, science, and even deep space exploration etc., prior to the creation of a viable vaccine, this microscopic organism made evident humankind's impotence in the face of Covid-19's advance and showed us that the power we assume we possess is not inviolable. This calls to mind what the Qur'an says about the end of the life of this world, Q. 10:24:

²⁴The life of this world is like this: rain that We send down from the sky is absorbed by the plants of the earth, from which humans and animals eat. But when the earth has taken on its finest appearance, and adorns itself, and its people think they have power over it, then the fate We commanded comes to it, by night or by day, and We reduce it to stubble, as if it had not flourished just the day before. This is the way We explain the revelations for those who reflect.

It could be asked, 'Does the Qur'an have anything at all relevant to say with regard to the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic?' In the following we shall see that, being a scripture – indeed one claiming to possess eternal wisdom and guidance, the Qur'an has a variety of teachings to offer.

The Origin of Disease in the Qur'anic Worldview

As a religious text, the Qur'an affirms God as the source of all things, for instance God is described as the 'creator of everything' (*khāliq kulli shay'in*, Q. 6:102), also it confirms that 'God creates what you don't know' (*wa-yakhlūqu mā lā ta'alamūn*, Q. 16:8) – note the verb in Q. 16:8 is in the imperfect which indicates present and future, meaning that God does this and will always do it. The import is that His universal laws allow for events to take place, such as the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. Moreover, the Prophet said,

'God has sent down both the disease and the cure, and He has appointed a cure for every disease, so treat yourselves medically,





but use nothing unlawful.⁽¹⁾

The Qur'anic challenge to those who deny and doubt the role that Providence plays in all this is, 'Have they been created out of nothing? Or did they create themselves?' (*am khuliqū min ghayri shay'in am humu'l-khāliqūn*, Q. 52:35).

As a scripture, held by Muslims to be the final word of God, the Qur'an's message is considered to encompass all situations. Indeed, in a popular Egyptian anecdote the modern 19th Century Egyptian Islamic Scholar and Grand Mufti of Egypt (1899–1905), Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) was asked by one Captain Cook, a consultant for the Ministry of Education, 'You say the Qur'an contains everything, does it say how many loaves of bread you can make out of a kilo of flour?' Abduh responded, 'Yes', and called for the baker to be summoned whom he then questioned and then gave his answer to Cook, Abduh then quoted Q. 21:7, 'Ask those who know, if you don't know' (*fa's'alū ahla'l-dhikri in kuntum lā ta'lamūn*).⁽²⁾

Mankind's Impotence in the Face of God's Will / Decree

The Qur'an gives several examples of smaller creatures causing havoc to larger ones. In Q. 105 we are told that an invading army riding on elephants was destroyed by birds that pelted it with stones of baked clay. And among the plagues of Pharaoh and his people were locusts, lice, frogs,

(1) *Sunan Abī Dāwūd (inna'llāha anzala al-dā'a wa'l-dawā' wa-ja'ala li-kulli dā'in dawā'an fa-tadāwaw wa-lā tadāwaw bi-ḥarāmin, إِنَّ اللَّهَ أَنْزَلَ الدَّاءَ وَالذَّوَاءَ وَجَعَلَ لِكُلِّ دَاءٍ دَوَاءً (فَتَدَاوَوْا وَلَا تَدَاوَوْا بِحَرَامٍ)*. For general discussions on Islamic Medicine see: Peter Adamson and Peter Pormann. *Philosophy and Medicine in the Formative Period of Islam*. London: Warburg Institute, 2018. Peter E. Pormann and Emilie Savage-Smith. *Medieval Islamic Medicine*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007. Khatīb, Hishām Ibrāhīm. *Al-Wajīz Fī Al-ṭibb Al-Islāmī*. al-Ṭab'ah 'Ammān: Dār al-Arqam, 1985. Irmeli Perho, *The Prophet's Medicine: A Creation of the Muslim Traditionalist Scholars*. Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 1995.

(2) Jibra'il b'in Yusuf and Hashir A. Abdulsalam, 'Time, Knowledge and the Clash of Civilizations: An Islamic Approach', *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies* 1:1 (2011) p. 50–51). Stearns, Justin K. *Infectious Ideas: Contagion in Premodern Islamic and Christian Thought in the Western Mediterranean*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.



and blood (Q. 7:133). Moreover, the powerlessness of humankind in the face of God's will is illustrated with the parable of a fly, Q. 22:73–74 says:

⁷³You people, here is an illustration, so listen carefully: those you call on beside God could not, even if they combined all their forces, create a fly, and if a fly took something away from them, they would not be able to retrieve it. How feeble are the petitioners and how feeble are those they petition! ⁷⁴They have no grasp of God's true measure: God is truly most strong and mighty.

Disease Prevention, Control, and Cure

It is not the Qur'an's place to talk about diagnostics or vaccines, rather it offers generic guidance that may be applicable to pandemics and how to deal with them. The Qur'an's teachings have bearing on issues related to health and hygiene, as well as prevention and cure. One of the most important sources for understanding the Qur'an is via the Prophet Muḥammad's teachings (Ḥadīth), these reports of Muḥammad's sayings and actions explain and complement the Qur'an and offer further elucidation and guidance to the believers. Together the Qur'an and Sunna make up the textual sources of Islam.

Individual Responsibilities and Exhortations for Self-Care

The Qur'an gives categorical instruction to believers, 'Do not throw yourselves with your own hands into ruin' (*wa-lā tulqū bi-aydikum ilā'l-tahluka*, Q. 2:195), as well as, 'Do not destroy yourselves: God is merciful to you' (*wa-lā taqtulū anfusakum inna'llāha kāna bi-kum raḥīmān*, Q. 4:29), so believers are under orders to refrain from self-harm or knowingly engage in actions that would be detrimental to them. The injunction to exercise caution and take proper recourse to protection (and medication) is illustrated via a ḥadīth narrated by al-Tirmidhī. The message being, one is expected to do one's bit before placing one's trust in a higher power.

A man asked, 'O Messenger of God, should I tie my camel and trust in God, or should I leave her untied and trust in God?' The





oneself and exposing oneself to danger is forbidden,⁽¹⁾ moreover, the Prophet exhorts his followers:

‘Strive for what benefits you, seek help from God and do not weaken.’⁽²⁾

Social Responsibilities

The Qur’an urges the believers to *Keep your duty to Allah as far as you are able* (*fa’ttaqū’llāha mā’sata’tum*, Q. 64:16). This individual sense of responsibility and accountability is continuously emphasised within the Qur’an by its reference to divine judgement. Also, it exhorts the believers to ‘Obey God and the Messenger and those in authority among you’ (*aṭī’ū’llāha wa-aṭī’ū’l-rasūla wa-ulī’l-amri minkum*, Q. 4:59). In fact, by virtue of this divine exhortation such obedience becomes rewardable because it complies with the teachings of the Qur’an in keeping oneself and one’s community safe. In the context of the Coronavirus pandemic this *ulū’l-amr* extends to governing authorities or medical authorities and so on, meaning that all local and national legislation on lockdown, maintaining social distance, hygiene (for e.g. washing hands etc.) and such should be adhered to.

Hygiene and Cleanliness

Cleanliness is part of God’s blessings. One of the very first instructions to the Prophet when he received the earliest verses of the Qur’an was to cleanse his clothes (Q. 74:1–4):

¹You, wrapped in your cloak, ²arise and give warning! ³Proclaim the greatness of your Lord; ⁴cleanse your clothes; ⁵keep away from all filth...

(1) The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "Religion is very easy and whoever overburdens himself in his religion will not be able to continue in that way. *إِنَّ الدِّينَ يُسْرٌ، وَلَنْ يُشَادَّ الدِّينَ أَحَدٌ إِلَّا غَلَبَهُ،*

(2) *Sunan Ibn Mājah (iḥriṣ ‘alā mā yanfa’uka wa’sa’in bi’llāhi wa-lā ta’jiz, احرص على ما يتفَعك واستعين بالله ولا تعجز*



Indeed, *God loves those who purify themselves* (wa'llāhu yuḥibbu'l-muṭṭahhirīn, Q. 9:108)

He also '*sent down water from the sky to cleanse you*' (wa-yunazzilu 'alaykum min al-samā' mā'an li-yuṭahhirakum bihi, Q. 8:11).

Muḥammad was reported to have said, 'cleanliness is half of faith'⁽¹⁾ and 'Indeed God is Ṭayyib (good) and He loves that which is good, [God] is Naẓīf (clean) and He loves cleanliness.'⁽²⁾

The injunctions exhorting toward cleanliness are numerous in both the Qur'an and the Sunna.

God does not wish to place any burden on you; He only wishes to cleanse you and perfect His blessing on you, so that you may be thankful (Q. 5:6).

In their daily regime Muslims are urged to clean different parts of their bodies many times, and cleansing the mouth and teeth is particularly emphasised in numerous ḥadīths.⁽³⁾ In addition to obligatory bathing after intercourse and menstruation, as well as the exhortation to bathe on a variety of other occasions,⁽⁴⁾ the Prophet stressed: 'It is the right of God over every Muslim that he should have a bath every seven days.'⁽⁵⁾

Moreover, the obligatory requirements of ritual cleanliness (Q. 5:6) prior to the five daily prayers, that are required of Muslims would indubitably have

(1) *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, (al-ṭuhūru shaṭru'l-īmān. الطُّهُورُ شَطْرُ الْإِيمَانِ).

(2) *Al-Tirmidhī* (inna'llaha ṭayyibun yuḥibbu'l-ṭayyiba naẓīfun yuḥibbu'l-naẓāfa. إِنَّ اللَّهَ طَيِّبٌ يُحِبُّ الطَّيِّبَ نَظِيفٌ يُحِبُّ النَّظَافَةَ).

(3) Abū Bakr related that Muḥammad said, 'The siwak is cleansing to the mouth and pleasing to the Lord' (al-siwāku muṭharatun li'l-fam marḍātun li'l-rabb, السِّوَاكُ مَطْهَرَةٌ لِلْفَمِ مَرْضَاةٌ لِلرَّبِّ). Nasimi, Mahmud Nazim. *Al-Tibb Al-nabawi Wa Al-ilm Al-hadith*. Dimashq: al-Sharikat al-Muttahidah li'l-Tauzi', 1984.

(4) *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 'Ghusl (taking a bath) on Friday is compulsory for every Muslim reaching the age of puberty' (al-ghuslu yawma'l-jumu'ati wājibun 'alā kulli muḥtalimin, (الْغُسْلُ يَوْمَ الْجُمُعَةِ وَاجِبٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُحْتَلِمٍ).

(5) *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, (li'llāhi ta'ālā 'alā kulli muslimin ḥaqqun an yaghtasila fī kulli sab'atin ayyāmin yawman, (لِللَّهِ تَعَالَى عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ حَقٌّ أَنْ يَغْتَسِلَ فِي كُلِّ سَبْعَةِ أَيَّامٍ يَوْمًا).



an effect in lessening the possibility of spreading infection. Up to five times a day, believers are required to wash their hands and faces, rinse their mouths and noses, and wash their feet. The Prophet recommended the repetition of these actions three times each - which would be in line with the 20 seconds recommended by today's public health authorities.

Disease Prevention: preventing infection

Some of the Prophet Muḥammad's statements are categorical injunctions aimed at preventing the spread of a known infectious disease. He is reported to have said:

'If you hear there is a plague in a land, do not enter it, and if it strikes while you are in a land, do not leave it.'⁽¹⁾

'A person with an infectious disease should not be brought among healthy ones.'⁽²⁾

Finding and Utilising Cures

The Prophet was asked specifically regarding medicines and precautions:

He was asked, 'Tell us about the medicines and precautions we take: do they avert the decree of God?' to which he answered, 'They are part of the decree of God.'

He also said,

God Almighty has not created a disease for which He has not created a cure, though some may know it and others may not.

And with reference to aspiring towards benefitting others – such as in the race for inventing a cure for instance, he said:

'The best of people are those whose benefit to people is greatest.'

(1) *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, (إِذَا سَمِعْتُمْ بِالطَّاعُونَ بِأَرْضٍ فَلَا تَدْخُلُوهَا، وَإِذَا وَقَعَ بِأَرْضٍ وَأَنْتُمْ بِهَا فَلَا تَخْرُجُوا مِنْهَا).

(2) *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 'The ill should not be taken among the healthy' (لَا يُرِيدُ الْمُمْرِضُ عَلَى الْمُصِحِّ، 'alā'l-muṣiḥhi).



The Qur'an and Sunnah's Scientific Legacy

Islamic Medicine, Medical Ethics, and Consumer Protection

The textual proofs cited above inspired the early Muslims to engage with the scientific heritage of the Greeks, the Syrians, the Persians and the Indians,⁽¹⁾ a great number of these works were translated into the Arabic language. Islam encourages the pursuit of knowledge,⁽²⁾ and the discipline of Islamic medicine sought to preserve, systematise, and develop the medical knowledge of 'classical antiquity'.⁽³⁾ The scientific and medical knowledge of the Greeks and others was greatly esteemed by the Arabs, likewise Christian and Jewish physicians were highly sought after and in great favour with the ruling class. As such the precursors to this knowledge were respected, so much so that Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a (d. 1269), the Muslim biographer, said of the pagan Hippocrates, 'He was aided by divine assistance.'⁽⁴⁾

This translation enterprise laid the groundwork for the works of numerous figures in both medicine and surgery such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna, d. 959). Islamic medicine integrated medical and scientific concepts from ancient Greece, Rome, Mesopotamia, Persia, and India, whilst continuing to develop the field and making numerous advances and innovations.⁽⁵⁾ In fact,

‘... “Arabism” in medicine of the West, that trend which was dominant for centuries, and was reversed only in modern times, and after long arguments. For long the rule held that he who

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- (1) M. Ullmann, *Islamic Medicine* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1978), pp. 8–9, 11, 20. Fazlur Rahman. *Health and Medicine in the Islamic Tradition: Change and Identity*. New York: Crossroad, 1989.
- (2) Muḥammad is reported to have said, 'Seek knowledge, even unto China.'
- (3) D. Campbell, *Arabian Medicine and Its Influence on the Middle Ages* (December 2013).
- (4) Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *Uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā'* (Beirut, 1979), vol. 1, p. 41
- (5) See R. Lakhtakia's 'A Trio of Exemplars of Medieval Islamic Medicine: Al-Razi, Avicenna and Ibn Al-Nafis', *Sultan Qaboos University Medical Journal*, 14:4 (2014), pp. e455–e459.



would be a good doctor must be a good Avicennist.⁽¹⁾

Two genres developed alongside Islamic medicine, that of medical ethics, wherein scholars the like of al-Rāzī, Avicenna, and Ibn Nafīs discussed the notion of morality in medicine and ‘consumer protection’ (*hisba*), wherein the qualifications of the physician, their physical and moral characteristics, their equipment, their rights and duties etc. were discussed at some length.⁽²⁾

Maqāṣid al-sharī‘a and *qawā‘id al-fiqhiya*

Yet another vital source for Islamic medicine includes the *maqāṣid al-sharī‘a* (‘objectives of Islamic law’), these principles are what the scholars have conceived as representing the objectives and intent of the *sharī‘a*. The essential objectives protected by the *sharī‘a* have been recognised as five:⁽³⁾ a person’s life, mind, religion, honour, and property. The *sharī‘a* categorises people’s needs and aspirations into three levels: the essentials (*ḍarūriyāt*), the needs (*hājīyāt*), and the luxuries (*taḥsīniyāt*), all of these levels are protected, however, ‘the first principle defines the general objective of the *sharī‘ah* as the attainment of what is beneficial to people by protecting what is essential to them and promoting what is needed and what is commendable’⁽⁴⁾ (i.e. as a rule the luxuries would give way to the needs and essentials, and the needs would give way to the essentials).

The *qawā‘id al-fiqhiya* are rules that of themselves are rooted in the textual sources of Islam, the Qur’an and the Sunna – codified, in the form of legal maxims – these prove eminently useful, particularly in the field of innovative medicine, in that their ease of reference allows them to be cited in novel situations. The rules of *fiqh* are concerned with the rulings

(1) M. Ullmann, *Islamic Medicine*, p. 54.

(2) M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, ‘Medical Ethics in Islam’ in A. Grubb (ed.), *Choices and Decisions in Health Care* (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 1993) pp. 3–4.

(3) For a good summary on this see: Mohammed Hashim Kamili, *Al-Maqasid Al-Shari‘ah: The Objectives of Islamic Law*.

(4) Abdel Haleem, ‘Medical Ethics in Islam’ p. 4 and A. Khallāf, *Islamic Jurisprudence* (in Arabic) (Cairo, 1990), p. 108.



themselves, they offer succinct summaries that may traverse a variety of jurisprudential specialities and on many occasions may be used as a basis for a ruling directly.

To illustrate the relevance and utility of these rules of *fiqh*, particularly in the field of medicine, a number of them that are frequently resorted to in contemporary medical legal reasoning are cited here:

- 'Hardship calls for relief' (*al-mashaqqa tajlib al-taysir*)
- 'Harm should be removed' (*al-dararu yuzālu*)
- 'Harm should not be removed by an equal harm' (*al-dararu lā yuzālu bi-mithlihi*).
- 'Where it is inevitable, the lesser of the two harms should be done' (*yurtakabu akhaff al-dararain*)
- 'Removing the harm takes precedence over realising the benefit' (*dar' al-mafāsidi awlā min jalbi'l-maṣāliḥ*).
- 'Necessity makes lawful that which is prohibited' (*al-darūrāt tubīḥ al-maḥzūrāt*).
- 'The limits of necessity should be defined precisely and not exceeded' (*al-darūrātu tuqaddaru bi qadrihā*)
- 'Wherever benefit lies, there lies the way of the *sharī'a*' (*haythu ma kānat al-maṣlaḥa fa-thamma shar' Allah*)

It is rules such as these cited above that continue to enrich Islamic law, allowing it to adapt and grow continuously, and enabling scholars of the past and present to form opinions on matters and practices in unprecedented times and environments.

Conclusion

The Qur'an directs Muslims to reflect on the *āyāt* (signs) of God, these include natural phenomena such as the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic just as much as natural disasters or the wonders of the creation. These are all signs of God, which He keeps revealing to humans:

We shall show them our signs on the horizons and in themselves until it becomes clear to them that this is the truth (sa-nurīhim āyātīnā fī'l-āfāqi wa-fī anfusihim ḥattā yatabayyana lahum annahu'l-ḥaqq, Q. 41:53).

When the people of Mecca demanded a sign from the Prophet, the Qur'an responded that everything about them was replete with His signs, He directed him to say to them:

...God certainly has the power to send down a sign, though most of them do not know: ³⁸all the creatures that crawl on the earth and those that fly with their wings are communities like yourselves (qul inna'llāha qādirun 'alā an yunazzila āyatan walākinna aktharahum lā ya'lamuna wa-mā min dābbatin fī'l-arḍi wa-lā ṭā'irin yaṭīru bi-janāḥayhi illā umamun amthālukum, Q. 6:37–38).

According to the Qur'an and ḥadīth, then, believers are ordered to take every precaution available against being infected with coronavirus and every treatment to recover from Covid-19. In doing this, like anyone else who follows the official health instructions, they are fulfilling their individual and social responsibilities and collectively protecting their communities, all with the promise of God's reward, in obedience and compliance to the objectives of His *sharī'a*.

A believer has the faith that Covid 19 and vaccination are part of God's destiny for the world, and His *sunan* in the world, accepting this with faith and taking the attitude that 'we belong to God and to Him we shall return'. This can be seen as a better attitude for mental health and acceptance of trauma. It could be argued that, in the final analysis, believers are not losing anything by following their faith. They believe that there is not only this world but there is also a next world, where any wrongs will be put right, so they are gaining some consolation that others do not participate in.

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