

# The Notion of “Light” Interpreted in “The Niche of the Lights” of Al-Ghazali

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## Abstract

Since the revelation of the Holy Qur'an to the Prophet Mohammad, Muslim thinkers have been interested in the interpretation of the 35th verse of the Surah “Light”. From Fārābi, Avicenna and Sohrawardi to contemporary Islamic scholars, the structure, content and symbolism of this verse, reputed by the title of the verse of the Light, have been studied and commented on several methods. Imam Abu Hamed Mohammad Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), the Great Iranian Master of jurisprudence, theology, ethics, philosophy, logic and gnostic has written a very concise essay on this subject, in order to answer the question of a disciple who asks him to interpret this qur'anic verse. This book, written in Arabic, is called “Mishkat-al-Anwar”, which means “The Niche of the lights”. In this article, we will faithfully follow the approach taken by Al-Ghazali, this famous Muslim thinker, who was born in Iranian region of Khorasan at the time of the Seljukide dynasty, to explain the qur'anic notion of the Light.

**Keywords:** Quranic Studies, Light Surah, Light Verse, The Niche of the Lights, Al-Ghazali

## Introduction

“Allâh is the Light of the Heavens and of the Earth. The similitude of His Light is as it were a Niche wherein is a Lamp: the Lamp within a Glass: the Glass as it were a pearly Star. From a Tree right blessed is it lit, an Olive-tree neither of the East nor of the West, the Oil whereof were well-nigh luminous though Fire touched it not:

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Light upon Light. Allah guides to His light whom He wills. And Allah presents examples for the people, and Allah is Knowing of all things.

Since the revelation of the Holy Qur'an to the Prophet Mohammad, Muslim thinkers have been interested in the interpretation of the 35th verse of the Surah "Light". From Fārābi, Avicenna and Sohrawardi to contemporary Islamic scholars, the structure, content and symbolism of this verse, reputed by the title of the verse of the Light, have been studied and commented on several methods.

### **Explain the Problem**

Imam Abu Hamed Mohammad Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), the Great Iranian Master of jurisprudence, theology, ethics, philosophy, logic and gnostic has written a very concise essay on this subject, in order to answer the question of a disciple who asks him to interpret this qur'anic verse.

This book, written in Arabic, is called "Mishkat-al-Anwar", which means "The Niche of the lights". The biographers of this great Muslim thinker, who was born in Iranian region of Khorasan at the time of the Seljukide dynasty, consider this book as the latest work of Imam Al-Ghazali, as the professor of Nezamiyeh university of Baghdad.

The Niche of the Lights is divided into three chapters. In the first chapter, the author speaks about the term "Light" (in its physical as well as spiritual sense), its definition, its meanings, its degrees, and its classifications. The second chapter concerns the symbolic representation of the five key terms mentioned in the verse of the Light and the five levels of human understanding, referring to the order of the hierarchical disposition of the objects mentioned in this mysterious verse.

In the third chapter, Al-Ghazali interprets a statement (hadith) from the Prophet concerning the veils of light and darkness, but the subject of this last chapter does not fit into the problematic of this article, which wants to study the qur'anic notion of Light in the verse of the Light.

In this essay of less than 100 pages, the great Al-Ghazali addresses also many other themes in gnostic, exegesis and wisdom. The subjects addressed in this book are sometimes repeated in the other works of Imam Al-Ghazali, as the author himself testifies in certain passages of the book.

Therefore, this article focuses on Al-Ghazali's definition of the term Light in "The Niche of the Lights". We will faithfully follow the approach taken by this famous scientist to explain the qur'anic notion of the Light. In the first chapter, Al-Ghazali determines the meanings of the word "Light" among the three categories of people; ordinary people, elites and elites of the elites.

With regard to ordinary people, the word Light is used, according to Al-Ghazali, in the sense of the apparition (Zohour). The popular meaning of the word Light is based on the faculty derived from the five human senses, especially the sense of sight. In relation to the question of visibility, Al-Ghazali divides the objects of this world into three categories:

1. Objects devoid of light, which are not visible, like dark objects.
2. Objects that are visible but cannot make visible or illuminate other objects, such as distant stars.
3. Objects that are visible and make visible and illuminate other objects, such as the Sun.

At this point, Al-Ghazali asserts that the title Light can be only attributed to the objects of the third category. These objects have the faculty of appearance (Zohour) and appearing (Ezhar). Al-Ghazali specifies that:

The nature of light and its intelligibility, therefore, consist in being apparent to perception, but perception is subordinated both to the existence of light and to that of the eye endowed with sight. Light is that which is apparent and which makes it appear, but for the blind, no light is apparent or makes it appear.

So the name “Light” deserves more to be applied to what sees rather than to what is seen. (Al-Ghazali: 39)

### **The Notion of “Light” Interpreted in “The Niche of the Lights”**

Al-Ghazali reminds us that even in the Persian language, the word light is related to the ocular system. For example, Iranian people often use the expression “the light of vision” where they want to say that a blind person or a man, in a state of old age, loses “the light of his eye”. But Al-Ghazali does not limit humans’ ability to see to their ocular system, in the material and physical sense.

He points out that man is equally provided with another interior organism to see and discern things. According to him, this inner eye can be called the intellect. In Iranian gnostic and Persian-speaking literature, this means of knowledge is translated by the term the Eye of the Heart.

By comparing the capabilities of physical vision with those of the metaphysical and spiritual vision, Al-Ghazali enumerates the seven limits of the primitive meaning of human vision. According to him, the external vision or the material eye of human being suffers from these seven defects:

1. It sees others but does not see itself.
2. It does not see what is too far from it.
3. It does not see what is behind a veil.
4. It sees things outside but not their inside.
5. It sees certain beings and not all beings.
6. It sees what is limited and does not see what is unlimited.
7. In the very act of visual perception, it is often mistaken, believing little what is great, near what is distant, in motion what is motionless or vice versa. (Al-Ghazali: 40)

Then, Al-Ghazali approves by his arguments that the intellect or the internal vision is more effective than the external vision as the intellect escapes these seven defects.

He sums up: The external eye belongs to the visible world, the internal eye belongs to another world, that is, that of the Kingdom of heaven (Malakut). To each eye correspond respectively a sun and a light through which its vision. There is an outer sun and an inner sun. The outer sun belongs to the sensible world and it is the sensible sun. The inner sun belongs to the celestial world. It identifies with the Koran and other divine books revealed. (Al-Ghazali: 46)

Al-Ghazali considers the Qur'an as a perfect equivalent to the notion of Light. He says that qur'anic verses act for the intellect (the inner eye) like the sun acting for the physical eye.

Al-Ghazali gives some examples of the qur'anic verses in which Eternal God uses the word Light to evoke the Holy Qur'an: “the light of vision”

- “Believe therefore in God, in His Messenger, and in the light which We have revealed”. (Qur'an, At-Taghābun: 8)
- “A proof has come to you from your Lord, and We have sent down to you a bright Light”. (Qur'an, An-Nisā: 174)

In addition to the Qur'an, Al-Ghazali also refers to other sacred books without further mentioning them. In addition to the qur'anic text, Imam Al-Ghazali also takes the status of prophecy as another equivalent to the notion of the Light:

This property belongs to the prophetic Holy Spirit, through which the light of knowledge is cast upon the creatures. So we understand what God means by calling Mohammad “The Torch That Illuminates” (Seraj Monir). All the prophets are “torches”, and so are the scientists, but there is an incalculable difference between them. (Al-Ghazali: 48)

Al-Ghazali then speaks of the hierarchical order between the sources of light and objects that reflect only the light of others. He confirms that in this hierarchy, the object that is closer to the primary source of the Light is brighter than others, as a ray of

106) / Journal of PURE LIFE, Vol. 7, No. 24 (Rajab 1442. Esfand 1399. March 2021)  
the sun strikes a mirror and then its reflection falls on a wall to illuminate it. As for the honorable prophet, Al-Ghazali says:

If the name of “illuminating torch” is well suited to what gives the light of the vision, what the torch itself borrows from it deserves to be referred to as “fire” (nār). The terrestrial torches are originally borrowed from the higher lights, so that the prophetic holy spirit is such that “its oil would burst even if no fire touched it”, but it becomes “Light on Light” when the fire touches it. (Al-Ghazali: 48)

Al-Ghazali, therefore, concludes that only the first source of light can be called Light because the other lights in this world owe their luminous aspect to a superior source.

The name Light rightly refers to the ultimate and supreme Light, above which no other light exists, and which is the Source of the one that descends on others... I do not hesitate to say that the term light applied to something other than the principal Light is a pure metaphor (madjaz). (Al-Ghazali: 50-51)

At this level, Al-Ghazali parallels the questions of existence and essence with the term Light asserting that the object whose light depends on another has no existence in itself. According to Al-Ghazali, non-existence is a kind of darkness and existence is a kind of light. Darkness is maximum nonexistence.

Thus, Al-Ghazali explains the notion of unity in the world by this relationship of subordination between the lights of creatures and the Divine Light. In reality, for Al-Ghazali the Light is God and God is the Light. And light for creatures enjoying divine grace is a means and a favor of existence.

He is the Light, there is no other light than Him, He is all the lights, He is the universal Light. (Al-Ghazali: 55)

Regarding the phrase “God is the Light of the Heavens and of the Earth”, Al-Ghazali speaks of two levels of light that fill the Universe. The first level concerns the sensible and material lights, visible to the outer eye, which come from the light of the stars, the Moon and the Sun in the heavens and light rays that spread over the Earth.

The second level concerns immaterial and non-physical lights. This light, in the vision of Al-Ghazali, is rooted in “angelic substances”, in a world superior to that of ours.

### **Five Illuminating Spirits of Human being**

As for the five terms, i.e. Niche, Glass, Lamp, Olive, and Oil, which are evoked in the verse of Light, in the second chapter of his book, Al-Ghazali relates these five symbolic terms to the five illuminating spirits of human being:

1. The sensible faculty, which is the common point between man and animal and is based on the five material senses; According to him, The sensible faculty... Its lights [the five senses] come out through a number of holes, such as the eyes, ears and nostrils, and the symbol that best corresponds to it is the “Niche”. (Al-Ghazali: 80)
2. The imaginative faculty, which receives data collected by the first faculty and archives them in order to provide them to the third faculty of human understanding; it consists of the capacity of human being to make images and to keep them in his/her mind. Al-Ghazali says that some animals with more developed brains are also endowed with this faculty. As for the human being, children and infants do not have this faculty in its entirety. The imaginative faculty. We find three peculiarities for it: First, it is made of opaque material, because the object perceived by the imagination has dimensions, a shape, directions and limits... Secondly, when this opaque imagination is purified, refined, polished and rectified, it then becomes conformable to intellectual realities. Thirdly, at the beginning, one needs the imagination to control the intellectual knowledge... These three properties are only found in the “glass”. Originally, in fact, it is an opaque substance, but, purified and refined, it does not mask the light of the lamp and transmits it as it is,

protecting it moreover against gusts of wind. Glass is, therefore, the main symbol of imagination. (Al-Ghazali: 80)

3. The intellectual faculty, which is reserved for human beings and is responsible for analyzing the data received and developing them to draw intelligible meanings from them: The intellectual faculty, through which the seizure of noble and divine knowledge takes place, is symbolized by the “Lamp”. (Al-Ghazali: 81)
4. The cogitative faculty, which receives the raw knowledge of the intellectual faculty to draw the final conclusions: The cogitative faculty, its property consists of starting from a single trunk, which will then give branches... The number of branches multiplies according to the intellectual divisions, to reach conclusions, which are the fruits carried by these branches... Symbol that suits him is “the tree”... The pulp of the fruit of the olive tree gives “the oil”, which is the material supplying the “lamps” and the olive oil is characterized by the fact that the light it gives is more radiant and smells less smoke, and if a fruit-rich tree is called “blessed”, how much more fruit that indefinitely called “Blessed Tree”! And since the ramifications of intellectual reflections escape relations of direction, proximity or distance, it is quite appropriate to say that it is “neither east nor west”. (Al-Ghazali: 81)
5. The prophetic holy faculty, which is reserved only for high-level prophets and saints: The prophetic holy faculty is attributable to the saints. A part of the cogitative faculty needs to be educated, awakened and assisted from the outside, to pursue the acquisition of various kinds of knowledge, but another part of it will awaken itself without outside help. It is this pure faculty that can be represented by the phrase: its oil would declare, or little even if no fire touched it. There are indeed saints whose light shines almost on their own, to the point that they could almost dispense with the assistance of the prophets.



There were some who could have done without the help of the angels, so this symbol is well suited to this faculty. (Al-Ghazali: 81)

## Conclusion

In the examined verse, the terms are positioned according to a well-ordered hierarchical order. The glass is in a niche. The lamp is in the glass. This shows the hierarchy between the sources of light. That is why the qur'anic verse says "Light on Light". Man, in the search for the Truth of Truths, needs to walk on the path of understanding and knowledge through a gradual process in order to find the source of Light.

## Resources

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