



Question:

Verse 176 of surah Baqarah states: {الَّذِينَ اختلفوا في الكتاب} "...Those who differ about the Book ... (2:176)". What is meant by 'Book' - is it the Qur'an or Torah? What does 'to differ about the Book' mean?

Answer:

In the meaning of 'Book' in this noble verse, {ذَلِكَ يَأْتِ اللَّهَ تَزْلَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ وَإِنَّ الَّذِينَ اخْتَلَفُوا فِيهِ} "That is so because Allah has sent down the Book with the truth, and those who differ about the Book are surely in extreme defiance (2:176)." There are a few points of view as to which heavenly book it is:

1. Some have said the meaning of 'Book', in this noble verse, is the Torah.
2. It is said that the meaning of 'Book' is the Qur'an.
3. Yet Jubba'ī says the Qur'an and the other heavenly books are meant
4. Some also say the meaning of 'Book' is both the Torah (as mentioned in point one) and the Qur'an (as mentioned in point two).

For this reason, several interpretations have been presented to answer the question of what the meaning of 'differ about the Book' is and who the ones differing are:

1. Those (who differ) are all the kuffar (infidels). They have differed about the Qur'an and have said that the Qur'an is like the discourse of magicians, or words that Mohammad (pbuh) had learnt from other humans or arranged himself, or a type of poetry or a myth that Mohammad (pbuh) formulated himself.
2. The People of the Book, i.e. the Jews or Christians, who differed in the interpretation and revelation of the Torah and Bible.
3. The infidels of Quraysh. Some of whom said the Qur'an is magic and fortune-telling while others said it is superstition.

However, we should note, although most commentators believe that the verses above were revealed about the People of the Book, but generally, the message verses are conveying in no way belong only to their occasions of revelation (Sha'n Nuzul). In fact, the occasions of revelation are 'excuses' and a means for transmitting general and universal rulings, making the occasion itself one of the instances where the ruling is to be applied, not the only one. Therefore, one should pay attention to the universal concept of the verse and that a group justify and distort to protect self-interest and bring differences into the heavenly book until, by use of an idiom, they muddy the water and then catch fish from that water. Such people that differ in the heavenly books are very far from the truth.

Detailed Answer:

To clarify the meaning of the verse, in the beginning it is necessary for us to have a look at the occasion of revelation (Sha'n Nuzul) of the noble verse: {ذَلِكَ يَأْتِ اللَّهَ تَزْلَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ وَإِنَّ} "That is so because Allah has sent down the Book with the truth, and those who differ about the Book are surely in extreme defiance (2:176)."

Occasion of Revelation:

Most commentators believe that the verses above have been revealed about the People of the Book and according to the opinion of many, particularly about the Jewish scholars, who before the advent of the Prophet of Islam (pbuh) told the people his attributes and signs according to findings in their own book. However, after the appearance of the Prophet (pbuh) and observing the inclination of people towards him, they feared that if they continued with the former method, their interests would be at risk and the gifts and parties arranged for them would be lost! Therefore, they concealed the qualities of the Prophet (pbuh), which were revealed in the Torah, and the above verses were revealed and strongly criticised them. As for what is meant by the 'Book' here, there is a difference of opinion amongst the scholars:

1. Some have said that the meaning of 'Book', in this noble verse, is the Torah, because the Christians claim that the characteristics of Jesus are in the Torah, but the Jews refute this.
2. It is said the meaning of 'Book' is the Qur'an.
3. Yet Jubba'ī say what is meant is the Qur'an and other heavenly books.
4. Some also say the meaning of 'Book' is both the Torah (as mentioned in point one) and the Qur'an (as mentioned in point two).

For this reason, several interpretations have been presented to answer the question of what the meaning of 'differ about the Book' is and who the ones differing are:

1. Some of the commentators say: those (who differ) are all infidels. They have differed about the Qur'an and a group of them said the Qur'an is the words of magicians, some said it is discourse that Mohammad (pbuh) learned from other humans, a group said he arranged it himself, a group of them said the Qur'an is poetry and some said it is a myth that Mohammad (pbuh) concocted himself.
2. Some say the meaning is not all infidels, but rather the People of the Book, i.e. the Jews and Christians, who differed in the interpretation and revelation of the Torah and the Bible because they had distorted the Torah and the Bible and thought of some parts of them (the Torah and the Bible) as the truth and some as falsehood, and concealed the qualities of the Prophet (pbuh), which were present in the Torah and the Bible. The Jews reject both the Bible and the Quran.
3. Some also believe that those who 'differ about the Book' were infidels of Quraish. Some of whom said the Qur'an is magic and fortune-telling while others said it is superstition.

However, we should note, although most commentators believe that the verses above were revealed about the People of the Book, but generally, the message verses are conveying in

no way belong only to their occasions of revelation (Sha'n Nuzul). In fact, the occasions of revelation are 'excuses' and a means for transmitting general and universal rulings, making the occasion itself one of the instances where the ruling is to be applied, not the only one. Therefore, one should pay attention to the universal concept of the verse, that God revealed the heavenly books with truth coupled with obvious reasons so that no doubt and ambiguity remains for anyone{ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ نَزَّلَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ}“That is so because Allah has sent down the Book with the truth... (2:176)”).

However, because a group distorted and twisted to protect their self-interests, they brought differences into the heavenly book until they, by use of an idiom, muddied the water and then caught fish in it. Such people that differ in the heavenly books are very far from the truth.Reference:

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