

The meaning of ‘ilm

Translated by Abu Abdirrahmaan Nasser ibn Najam

Taken from the works of Shaykh Muhammad ibn Saalih al ‘Uthaymeen (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

With regards to the meaning of ‘ilm (knowledge), Shaykh Muhammad ibn Saalih al ‘Uthaymeen (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ)¹ comments:

‘ilm (knowledge) is: to comprehend a matter in the way that it truly is, with a firm decisive comprehension.

Such as comprehending that an entire (thing) is more than part (of that thing); and that the intention is a precondition for an act of worship.

And the statement of ours “to comprehend a matter,” excludes not comprehending something completely; and this is called “al jahl ul baseet” (slight ignorance). An example is that a person is asked, “When was the battle of Badr?”² So he says, “I don’t know”.

And the statement of ours “in the way that it truly is” excludes his comprehending it in a way that is in opposition to how it truly is; and this is called “al jahl ul murakkab” (compound ignorance).³

An example is that a person is asked, “When was the battle of Badr?” So he says, “In the third year after the Hijrah”.⁴

¹ (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ) (rahimahullaah) May Allaah the Most High have mercy on him

² The battle took place in the second year after Hijrah.

³ Shaykh Muhammad ibn Saalih al ‘Uthaymeen rahimahullaah explains in Sharh Al Usool min ‘ilm ul usool (page 91) Why is this compound (ignorance)?

Because the person who has it is ignorant, and he is ignorant of the fact that he is ignorant.

He was asked, “When was the Battle of Badr?” He said, “In the third year after Hijrah.” They said (to him), “Are you sure?” He said, “I am sure; I don’t have any doubt about it that the Battle of Badr was in the third year after Hijrah.”

And this is despite his being certain – because being certain about something does not change the true reality (of that situation). We say that this is compound ignorance.

⁴ Shaykh Muhammad ibn Saalih al ‘Uthaymeen rahimahullaah explains in Sharh Al Usool min ‘ilm ul usool (page 91-2)

And which of the two is more repugnant – the ignorance which is baseet or that which is murakkab?

The answer is that compound ignorance is worse; and that is from various angles:

Firstly – because it is not permissible for a person to proceed upon a matter whilst being ignorant of it. And it is more repugnant than slight ignorance.

Allaah, the Most High, said:

And do not follow that of which you have no knowledge.

Soorah al Israa- (17) aayah 36

Secondly – that this ignorant person (who has) compound ignorance may well be ignorant of his own level and be deceived about it.

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And the statement of ours “with a firm decisive comprehension” excludes comprehending the matter with a comprehension that is not firm and decisive – in that he thinks (the matter) might possibly be other than the way in which he has comprehended it.

So that is not called “al 'ilm” (knowledge).

Then if one of the two possibilities seems more likely to him, the more likely is dhann (preponderant belief) and the less likely is wahm (delusion).

And if the two matters are equally (likely), then this is shakk (doubt).

(Al Usool min 'ilm ul usool, quoted in Rasaa-il fil usool of Shaykh Muhammad ibn Saalih al 'Uthaymeen rahimahullaah , p130)

And the person with slight ignorance will restrict himself within Allaah's Limits; he will not follow that which he has no knowledge of, and he knows his own level. So he says, “I don't know, I haven't been given knowledge of every single thing.”

And therefore we will recite a line or two of poetry to you about the story of the donkey of Toom al Hakeem.

The donkey of Toom al Hakeem said

“If destiny were to show justice, then I would be the one riding

Because I am one who has ignorance that is baseet

And my owner is someone who has ignorance that is murakkab.”

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