

THE QUR'ANIC CONCEPT OF INTELLECT

(The Word *aql* in the Qur'an)

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

....in this way We explain Our signs for a nation who use
their intellect.

(The Qur'an 030.028)

INTRODUCTION

This study is about the root word *aql* in the Qur'an; a word which is grossly misunderstood and misapplied by many contemporary muslims.

The object of this study is not to provide novel interpretations to the verses in which the words *aql* occurs, but only to explicate the grammatical relationships between this word and a group of other keywords in the Qur'an. For this reason, it should be considered as a map of the concepts that are grammatically related to *aql*. (A full list of the verses containing the root word *aql* is given in the last section.)

The word *aql* links, on the one hand with the 'mental' and 'psychological' concepts, and on the other hand with the political concepts, and therefore, is an important word in the Qur'an. It belongs to a constellation of words, the complete understanding of which will shape the philosophy of mind, philosophy of science and the political philosophy of the future.

GRAMMATICAL REMARKS ON *AQL*

*"God created Intellect and said to it: Advance! and it advanced.
Then He said to it: Return! and it returned. And He said: By
My power and majesty, I have created no creature more
amiable to Me than you." (1)*

The root word *aql* occurs nowhere in the Qur'an in the noun form. In the verses (= ayat) this word occurs only in the verb form such as: *aqalu*, *ta'qilun*, *na'qilu*, *ya'qiluha* and *ya'qilun*, in which it is translated as **using the intellect**.

As is known, in Classical Arabic generally, nouns, verbs and attributes are derived from three-letter root words. (For example, from the root **k-t-b**, the nouns and verbs like: *kitab*, *katib*, *kataba*, *maktub* are derived.)

It is significant that the word *aql* does not occur in the noun form, and the wisdom of this needs to be investigated. Its occurrences only in the verb form suggest that it has a dynamic application. In all these verses, this word designates an activity which is performed, or needs to be performed, or an activity that is not performed despite its indispensability.

The first thing that attract our attention in these verses is that this activity is always referred to as a positive one. If we translate the verb form of *aql* as **using the intellect** or **activating the intellect**, then we see that there is no occurrence to suggest that **using the intellect** has any undesirable consequence whatsoever. On the contrary, it refers to an activity, not only desirable, but also as something indispensable for mankind to distinguish them from other beings (i.e. animals, plants, etc.) This makes *aql* one of the grossly misunderstood and misused words of the Qur'an by many of today's muslims.

aql occurs in the verses in pointing out or rebuking a contradiction in behaviour as: *afa la ta'qilun* (002.044, 002.076, 003.065, 007.169, 010.016, 011.051, 021.067, 002.170, 005.058, 005.103, 059.014). Some of these verses actually refer to the **contradic-**

tions in Bani Israil's conduct (002.044, 002.076, 003.065, 007.169), which no doubt, are also applicable to all in similar situations.

It is important to notice the significance of **contradiction** in these verses, the way it is contrasted to **using the intellect**, where it emerges as a consequence of **not using the intellect**.

Some of the verses containing *aqī* are directed at false or deficient arguments about or against Allah (002.170, 039.043).

The verse that points out the contradiction of 'those who sought to create disorder' (= munafiqun) in that they feared muslims more than they feared Allah (059.014).

The verses that directly urge (or motivate) **to use the intellect** are numerous (002.073, 002.242, 003.118, 006.151, 012.002, 012.109, 021.010, 023.080, 024.061, 026.028, 028.060, 036.062, 037.138, 040.067, 043.003, 057.017, 029.043, 002.164, 013.004, 016.012, 016.067, 029.035, 030.024, 030.028, 036.068, 045.005).

The relationship between realizing the superiority of the life of the hereafter over the life of this world and 'using the intellect' is established in the verses (007.169, 028.060).

That those who do not use their intellect are like animals, and in some cases even lower than them (025.044).

A soul's belief in Allah is by the *izn* (2) of Allah, and the direct link between **belief** and **using the intellect** is established in the verse (010.100) as:

"A soul does not believe, except by the izn of Allah. And He leaves those who do not use their intellect in misery (filth)."

The logical connective **and** in this verse connects the first clause with the second. Thus **belief** and **using the intellect** are strongly linked together. In addition, we also see the connection between **not using the intellect** and **being left in misery (or filth)**.

Using the intellect against Satan's deviations, who, being envious of the privilege given to man, flouted the instruction of the Creator and refused to prostrate for the creation of man, and subsequently became the enemy of mankind (036.062):

"Indeed, (Satan) led astray many of you. Will you then not use your intellect?"

This is a particularly interesting verse and quite contrary to the common mistaken beliefs among some of today's muslims, who think that using the intellect may lead to unbelief!

Idols chosen as intercessors do not use (possess?) intellect (039.043).

Understanding the signs (= ayat) and using the intellect are always positively related (002.073, 002.242, 003.118, 012.002, 021.010, 024.061, 043.003, 057.017, 029.043, 030.028). Among these, the following verses refer to the Qur'an itself and its relation to using the intellect: (012.002, 021.010, 043.003).

Guidance and using the intellect are also positively related in the verses (067.010, 002.170). The first one is a very important verse which suggests that using the intellect prevents misguidance:

"(Those who were in the Fire) said: Had we listened (the Messenger), or used our intellect, we would not have been the companion of this fire."

We understand now why the muslim thinkers of the Classical Period had said that, even if no messenger came to a nation, they would still be able to find the right way by using their intellect, and that they would be under this obligation.

The second verse (002.170) puts **guidance** and **using the intellect** in the same frame.

"And when it is said to them: follow what allah has revealed, they said no! We follow that wherein we found our fathers. Even if their fathers did not use their intellect on anything or did not have any guidance?"

The verse (022.046) establishes an interesting grammatical relationship between *aql* and *qalb* (= heart):

“Did they not walk on the earth with hearts to use their intellect and ears to listen? It is not the eyes that become blind, but the hearts in their chests.”

The method of deciding whether the relationship between the heart and the intellect is a metaphorical or allegorical one, is outside the scope of this study, but the second part of the verse gives a grammatical clue in this matter.

Ilm (= knowledge) and **using the intellect** are related in (029.043):

“Thus We establish these similitudes for mankind, though none, but alimun (= those who have knowledge) use their intellect on them.”

The intellect is notably used, on the similitudes (**amsal**) which Allah gives in the verses, only by those who have knowledge (**alimun**). This draws at least an implication relationship – if not an equivalence – between the alimun and the activity of **using the intellect** on these similitudes.

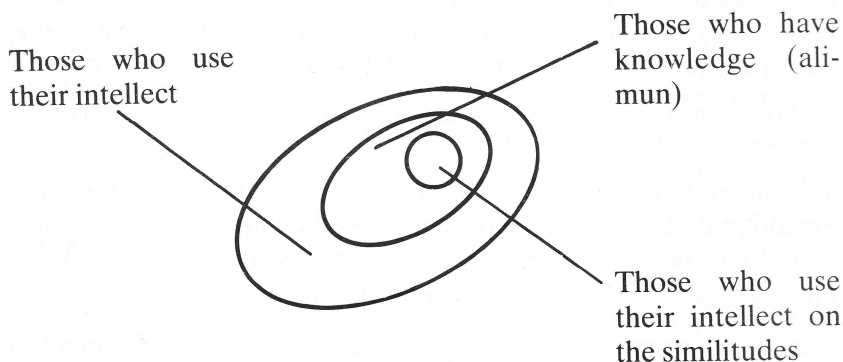


Figure 1. Diagram showing the possible logical relationship between the concepts 'alimun', 'those who use their intellect' and 'those who use their intellect on the similitudes'.

Using the intellect and **sha** (will of God) occur together in (010.016).

Ancient ruins and a nation (= **qawm**) using their intellect on them (029.035).

Aql and the socio-political concept **qawm** (= nation) are related in nine verses (002.164, 005.058, 016.012, 016.067, 029.035, 030.024, 030.028, 045.005, 059.014). The majority, (five, to be precise) of these verses refer to physical and biological events that take place in the world (002.164, 016.012, 016.067, 030.024, 045.005). Among these verses, (016.012) points to the fact that the heavenly bodies like the Moon, the Sun and the stars, and natural phenomena were made subservient to mankind (= **mu-sahharat**), and establishes the grammatical link between this fact and the concept **amr** (= the effective instruction) and a **qawm** (= **nation**) that use the intellect.

This is particularly interesting from the point of view of a nation's using their intellect and making use of the objects and the **natural powers** in the Universe. It is easy to derive from these verses that the collective use of the intellect must have an outstanding significance, the results of which may not be achieved by a single soul. The occurrences of **qawm** and **aql** in the same context like this cannot be insignificant, because we believe that every word, or even every letter of the Qur'an reflects a part of an excellent harmony like that of the Heavens.

Finally, **using the intellect** is not merely an activity with a final aim to achieve **belief** and something to be dispensed with afterwards. The following three successive verses (045.003-005) suggest that this conception of **aql** is unfounded:

"Indeed in the heavens (= samawat) and the earth (= ard), there are signs (= ayat) for those who believe (= yu'minun)."

"And in your creation and in the animals spread, there are signs for a nation who seeks to be near (= qawmin yu'qinun)."

“And in the interchange of the night and the day, and the provisions Allah sent from the sky (= sama), and his giving the land (= ard) life after its death (= ba'da mawtiha), and in the winds blowing, are signs (= ayat) for a nation who use their intellect (= qawmin ya'qilun).”

On the contrary, the order of these three successive verses suggest that **using the intellect** succeeds not only **belief** (= iman), but also **seeking to be near** (= yaqin). In other words, **using the intellect** is an activity that must be carried out at every stage of human perfection.

This conceptual order between the words **belief** (= iman), **yaqin** and **aql** has parallels between the words **tafakkur** (= thinking), **ilm** (= knowledge), **samia** (= listening to the Messenger) and **aql** in the following sets of verses: 039.042-043, 013.003-004, 016.011-012, 030.021-024.

This concludes our study of the grammatical order of the word **aql** in the Qur'an.

Allah knows best and forgives His servants.

NOTES

1 Ibn Bajje in one of his books, and al-Ghazali in his 'Ihya Ulum al-Din' related this as an authoritative hadith.

See: Altmann, A. Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism. Cornell University Press, 1969. p. 90 and 98.

See also: Ihya Ulum al-Din, Cairo 1312/1894-5, I, 69, 9.

2 The grammar of the word **izn** in the Qur'an needs to be investigated, as it is one of the important concepts related to **soul** and **intellect**.

THE QUR'ANIC VERSES IN WHICH AQL OCCURS

AQALU

002.075 So, do you still want them (jews) to believe you, when among them was a group who would listen to the word of Allah and they would change it after they aqaluhu and they knew it? (listen to the word of Allah = yasmauna kalamullah, yaharrifunahu min ba'di ma aqaluha wa hum ya'lamun).

TA'QILUN

002.044 Do you (Bani Israil) instruct others to be good when you forget yourselves while you read the book? Do you not use your intellect?

(you instruct = ta'muruna, yourselves = anfusakum, you read the book = tatluna al kitab, use your intellect = ta'qilun).

002.073 And We said: Strike this victim with a piece of the calf. So will Allah bring life the dead and will show you his signs so that you may use your intellect.

(will show you = yurikum, sign = ayah, la allakum ta'qilun).

002.076 When they (the jews) met those who believed, they said: We believe! But when they were left with themselves they said: Why are you telling them what Allah opened to you? To let them bring proof against you before Allah? Do you not use your intellect?

(telling them = tuhaddisuna, open = fataha, to bring proof = li yuhajjukum, afa la ta'qilun).

002.242 Thus Allah makes clear his signs so that you may use your intellect.

(la allakum ta'qilun).

003.065 People of the Book! Why do you bring arguments about Abraham? The Torah and the Gospel were not revealed until after him. Do you not use your intellect?

(afa la ta'qilun).

003.118 O you who believe! Do not make friends with other than your own, they would not spare pains to ruin you. They love to hamper you. Hatred is revealed by their mouths, but which their breasts hide is greater. We have made the signs clear so that you may use your intellect.
(la allakum ta'qilun).

006.032 The life of this world is nothing but a game and a pastime. Better is the abode of the hereafter for those who keep their duty (to Allah). Will you not use your intellect?
(abode of the hereafter = dar al akhira, keep duty = yattaqun, afala ta'qilun).

006.151 ... do not kill a soul Allah made sacred, except with a just cause. This is what He advises you so that you may use your intellect.
(soul = nafs, just cause = bil haqq, zalika wassakum la allakum ta'qilun).

007.169 ... has not the covenant of the book been taken on their behalf that they should not speak about Allah except with truth? They have studied what is therein. Indeed the life of the hereafter is better for who keep their duty to Allah. Do you not use your intellect?
(keep their duty to Allah = yattaqun, afa la ta'qilun).

010.016 Say: Had Allah willed, I would not have recited it to you, nor would I have warned you with it. I dwelt a lifetime before it (the revelation). Do you not use your intellect?
(afa la ta'qilun).

011.051 (Hud said) my people!. I ask no reward from you. My reward is only of Him who formed me. Do you not use your intellect?
(formed me / gave me form = fatarani, afa la ta'qilun).

012.002 Indeed We sent it down as a Qur'an in Arabic, so that you may use your intellect.
(la allakum ta'qilun).

012.109 ... did they not travel on the earth and see the ends of those who went before them? Indeed the abode of the hereafter is better for those who keep their duty (to Allah). Will you not use your intellect?

(the abode of the hereafter = dar al akhira, who keep their duty = allazina attaqaw, afala ta'qilun).

021.010 Verily We have sent down to you a book as your reminder. Will you not use your intellect?

(kitabani fihi zikrukum, your reminder? = zikrukum, afa la ta'qilun).

021.067 (Abraham said) fie on you an all that you worship other than Allah. Do you not use your intellect?

(afa la ta'qilun).

023.080 He is who gives life and causes death, and His is the change of the night into day. Do you not use your intellect?

(afa la ta'qilun).

024.061 ... thus Allah makes clear his signs, so that you may use your intellect.

(laallakum ta'qilun).

026.028 (Moses) said: The Sustainer of the east and the west, and what is in between, if you use your intellect!

(in kuntum ta'qilun).

028.060 And whatever is given to you is a comfort of the life of this world and its ornament. Whatever is in Allah's presence is better and more lasting. Do you not use your intellect?

(afa la ya'qilun).

036.062 Verily, he (Satan) led many of you to deviation. Will you not be using your intellect?

(la qad adalla minikum jibilan kathira, afa lam takunu ta'qilun).

037.136 ... and We destroyed the others.

037.137 you verily pass by (the ruin of) them in the morning,

037.138 and at night time. Will you not then use your intellect?

(afa la ta'qilun).

040.067 He is who has created you from soil, then from a drop of liquid, then from a clot of blood. Then He brings you out as a child. Then you attain full strength, and then you become old, though some of you die before, and that you reach an appointed term. Now you may use your intellect.
(wa laallakum ta'qilun).

043.003 We have made it a Qur'an in Arabic, so that you may use your intellect.
(laallakum ta'qilun).

057.017 Know that Allah gives life to the land after its death. Verily, We made our ayat clear to you, so that you may use your intellect.
(land = ard, ayat = signs / verses, laallakum ta'qilun).

NA'QILU

067.010 ... and they said: Had we listened or used our intellect, we would not have been the companions of this (hell) fire.
(law kunna nasmau aw na'qilu).

YA'QILUHA

029.043 And We narrate these similitudes (e.g. the similitude of the spider's web) for mankind, but none uses his intellect on it except the alimun.
(wa ma ya'qiluha illal alimun, alimun = those who have knowledge).

YA'QILUN

002.164 Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth, in the interchange of day and night, in the ship that flows in the sea for the benefit of the people, and in what Allah brings from the sky, some water with which he gives life to the land after its death, and the distribution of all kinds of animals on it, and in the ordinance of the winds, and the clouds obedient between the sky and the earth, there are signs for a nation that use their intellect.
(heavens = samawat, earth = ard, interchange = ikhtilaf, sky = sama, land = ard, nation = qawm, qawmin ya'qilun).

002.170 And when it is said to them: Follow what Allah has revealed, they said no! We follow that wherein we found our fathers. Even if their fathers did not use their intellect on anything or did not have any guidance?

(awa law kana abauhum la ya'qiluna shay'an wa la yahtadun).

002.171 Indeed the likeness of those who denied is: Someone who is called with what he does not hear anything except a shout and cry. They are deaf, dumb, and they do not use their intellect.

(likeness = mathal, wa hum la ya'qilun).

005.058 When you call to prayer, they make it a laughing matter. This is because they are a nation who do not use their intellect.

(nation = qawm, qawmin la ya'qilun).

005.103 Allah did not appoint a bahira, or saiba, or wasila, or a haam. No, those who denied Allah lied about him. Most of them do not use their intellect.

(wa aksaruhum la ya'qilun).

008.022 Verily, the worst of the beasts in Allah's sight are the deaf, the dumb, who do not use their intellect.

(allazina la ya'qilun).

010.042 Among them are some who listen to you. Can you make the deaf to hear even if they do not use their intellect?

(wa law kanu la ta'qilun).

010.100 There is no way for a soul to believe except with the izn of Allah. Indeed He sends filth upon those who do not use their intellect.

(filth = rijs, ala allazina la ya'qilun).

013.004 And on the earth, there are continents joining each other, vineyards and ploughed lands, like and unlike, which are watered with one water. Yet We made some of them excel others in fruit. Indeed there are signs in this for a nation who use their intellect.

(nation /equals qawm, inna fi zalika la ayatin li qawmin ya'qilun).

016.012 And He made subservient for you the night and the day. The sun and the moon and the stars have been made subservient

with his amr. Indeed in this, there are signs for a nation who use their intellect.

(made subservient = sahhara, have been made subservient = musahharat, amr = effective instruction, inna fi zalika la ayatin li qawmin ya'qilun).

016.067 And from the fruits of the date tree and grapes, you extract a nourishing drink. Indeed, in this, there are signs for a nation who use their intellect.

(sign = ayah, nation = qawm, inna fi zalika la ayatin li qawmin ya'qilun).

022.046 Did they not walk on the earth with hearts to use their intellect and ears to listen? It is not the eyes that become blind, but the hearts in their breasts that become blind.

(fa takun lahum qulubun ya'qilun, ta'mal qulub allati fissudur).

025.044 Or do you think that most of them listen or use their intellect? They are nothing but like animals. No they are even worse in their way.

(am tahsabu anna aksarahum yasmauna aw ya'qilun).

029.035 And indeed We have left clear signs in that (settlement) for a nation who use their intellect.

(li qawmin ya'qilun).

029.063 And when you ask them: Who brings the water down from the sky and gives life to the land after its death, they will say: Allah. Say: All praise be to Allah. But most of them do not use their intellect.

(sky = sama, land = ard, bal aksaruhum la ya'qilun).

030.024 And of his signs: He shows you the lightning with which you fear and hope. And he brings down water from the sky and gives life to the land after its death. Indeed in this, there are signs for a nation who use their intellect.

(sky = sama, land = ard, sign = ayah, inna fi zalika la ayatin li qawmin ya'qilun).

030.028 ... and in this way We explain Our signs for a nation who use their intellect.

(kazalika nufassil al ayati li qawmin ya'qilun).

036.068 He whom We bring to the old age, We reverse him in creation, will they not then use their intellect?
(afala ya'qilun).

039.043 Or chose they intercessors other than Allah? Say: Even if they do not have power over anything, and they have no intellect?
(la tamliquna shay'an wa la ya'qilun).

045.003 Indeed in the heavens and the earth, there are signs for those who believe. 045.004 And in your creation and in the animals spread, there are signs for a nation who seeks to be near. 045.005 And in the interchange of the night and the day, and the provisions Allah sent from the sky, and his giving the land life after its death, and in the winds blowing, are signs for a nation who use their intellect.

(heavens = samawat, earth = ard, sign = ayah, nation = qawm, believe = yu'minun, seeks to be near = yuqinun, sky = sama, land = ard, li qawmin ya'qilun).

049.004 Indeed those who call you from the back of your houses, most of them do not use their intellect.
(aksarihim la ya'qilun).

059.014 They fear you more than they fear Allah. This is because they are a nation who do not use their intellect.
(nation = qawm, qawmin la ya'qilun).

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