Synopsis of Friday Sermon
Ameer Mustapha Elturk

“In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

Synopsis of the Friday Sermon delivered by Ameer Mustapha Elturk on April 3, 2015

“Dawah with Insight Part 7”

The Soul’s Journey from Inception to Eternity
The Story of Adam and the Two Forms of Knowledge

Thus far we have learned that Adam (AS) was appointed by Allah (SWT) as His vicegerent and deputy on earth or khalifah (Caliph). In order for Adam (AS) to fulfill his mission, both forms of knowledge, knowledge of the created world and knowledge of the Creator, are required. They make the basis or foundation of this Caliphate.

Regarding the first type of knowledge, Adam received his primary education and training here on earth. This is typical of any job. For example, the owner of a store who wishes to hire a sales person selects the best candidate from a pool of applicants. Prior to assuming his responsibilities and duties, the employee receives education and training relevant to his job. The new hire is taught the names of the products he is to sell and how they work. Additionally, the employee is made aware of the policies of the company.

Allah (SWT) chose Adam (AS) to represent Him on earth. Prior to taking charge of the world, Adam (AS) was taught by his Master the names of everything he needed to know. “And He taught Adam the names of all things” (al-Baqarah, 2:31). Commenting on the ayah, Ibn Abbas (RA) said, “(Adam was taught) the names that people use, such as human, animal, sky, earth, land, sea, horse, donkey, and so forth, including the names of the other species.” He was asked, “Did Allah teach him the names of the plate and the pot?” Ibn Abbas replied, “Yes, and even the terms for breaking wind.” Allah (SWT) taught Adam everything that is related to the created world and explained their peculiarities.

Learning the names of things is consistent with the way we learn. Before teaching our babies the alphabet and how to speak sentences, we teach them the names of things. We point to a window for example, and say this is a window, or a door, table, ear, nose, hair, etc. This is precisely what Adam (AS) learned from Allah (SWT). We must however keep in mind that although Adam (AS), may have been a grown man, his intellect and ability to learn was in its infancy.

The faculty of the intellect is very special to humans. It is this faculty that enables one to think and reason objectively, particularly with regard to abstract ideas. Through the sense organs, we collect data and feed it into the computer of our brain to be processed. The job of the intellect is to sort out the data and make sense out of it; analyze, draw conclusions, make inferences and judgments. This unique ability to think in a logical way is reserved exclusively to man. Having been endowed with this faculty and aptitude, Adam ranks above all Allah’s creation including angels, for angels don’t possess such aptitude.

Besides conventional names, Adam was taught how to express himself, “(It is) the Lord of Mercy, (who) taught the Qur’an, created man, and taught him (how) to express himself” (al-Rahman, 55, 1-4). Man is not only able
to identify things, but also to articulate himself and express his or her feelings and thoughts when in pain, happy, hungry, etc.

Angelic nature is not capable of such awareness. Angels cannot experience the pangs of hunger and thirst, nor joy or sadness. Even if Allah (SWT) were to teach the angels what He taught Adam (AS), they would not be able to express themselves due to their unique nature.

Take for example a parrot. A parrot can be trained to not only say names but also to speak sentences. For instance, a parrot may be taught to say, “I am hungry.” It will say it perfectly. We are fascinated by its ability to repeat what we tell it to say. However, when it gets hungry it will not be able to express oneself and communicate, “I am hungry.” It wasn’t created with such abilities and aptitude. The same applies for angels.

This explains the situation in which Allah (SWT) displayed things before the angels and asked, “Inform Me of the names of these, if you truly (think you can)” (al-Baqarah, 2:31), they replied, “Glory be to You! We have no knowledge except what You have taught us. You are the all-Knowing, the all-Wise” (al-Baqarah, 2:32).

Angels are taught only what they need to know, not everything. Angel Jibril, Israfil, Mikael and Izrael for instance are only taught their areas of specialty. Archangel Jibril (AS) is the angel of revelation and is responsible for revealing the Qur’an to Muhammad (SAW). Israfil (AS) is an archangel in charge of blowing the horn/trumpet at the end of time. Mikail (AS) is depicted as the archangel responsible for bringing thunder and rain to the earth, while Izrael (AS), the angel of death, (“Malak al-mout,” as mentioned in the Qur’an), is the archangel responsible for taking the soul from the body.

Angels know only what Allah (SWT) taught them concerning their duties. Different angels are assigned different duties and Allah gave them the knowledge of that particular duty. By contrast, man has been given the faculties to facilitate a comprehensive knowledge of everything.

There is an opinion among the exegetes of the Qur’an which affirms that Allah (SWT) taught the names of things and expressions to Adam in the presence of the angels. Still, they couldn’t identify the things they were asked to name, rather they replied, “We know only what you taught us.” Adam, however, passes the test with excellence, “(Allah) said, ‘O Adam tell them the names of these.’ When he told them their names, (Allah) said, ‘Did I not tell you that I know the unseen (aspects/realities) of the heavens and the earth, and that I know what you reveal and what you conceal?’” (al-Baqarah, 2:33).

According to Imam al-Razi (RA) the statement, “Did I not tell you that I know the unseen (aspects/realities) of the heavens and the earth,” suggests that Allah (SWT) knew about Adam, his status and condition before He created him. Angels were not aware of Allah’s plan. Others interpret it to mean that Allah (SWT) in His infinite wisdom knew that good will inevitably triumph over evil and for that reason He (SWT) created humans with free will, knowing that some will be good while others would chose evil and that some will believe while others would disbelieve. Regarding the statement, “I know what you reveal,” according to Imam al-Razi, referring to the opinion of Ibn Abbas and Ibn Masoud (RAA), Allah (SWT) was referring to the statement the angels presented before Him when they were informed of the caliphate, “Will You place therein one who will make mischief and shed blood while we glorify You with praises and extol Your holiness?” (al-Baqarah, 2:30) As for the statement, “and what you conceal,” The same companions believe that Allah (SWT) was referring to Iblis (Satan) concealing his pride, which would ultimately stop him from performing sajdah (prostration) before Adam.

Consequently, Allah (SWT) equipped Adam (AS) with all necessary tools and means to obtain a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the physical world. In other words, Allah implanted the seed of knowledge in Adam. The explosion of knowledge in the 20th century and beyond is the fruit of that seed.

We may compare this phenomenon to a date-palm seed. The seed is planted in fertile soil. After some time it
sprouts, splits open and two leaves emerge. It grows over time to a mature fruit bearing tree provided the soil remains rich. The potential of a tree and fruits is imbedded in the seed. In essence, the whole tree existed in the seed.

Knowledge of the physical world has been progressing steadily for millenniums and today we are reaping the benefits of such knowledge. We are reaping the harvest of what was planted in Adam. Knowledge has continuously evolved from simple concepts and discoveries to complex inventions.

Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727), an English physicist, mathematician, astronomer, theologian and philosopher known as the most influential scientist in history and is most famous for discovering the Laws of Gravity, with all humility admits, “If I have seen further it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants.” It is about discovering truth by building on previous discoveries. And if one were to trace back the acquired knowledge, it would eventually reach Adam. But who taught Adam? “And He (Allah) taught Adam the names of all things” (al-Baqarah, 2:31).

All credit goes back not to Adam (AS) but to the one who taught Adam, Allah (SWT). Often, due to our own pride and arrogance, forget that it is indeed Allah (SWT) who should be praised for the great gift of the intellect He bestowed upon us. Indeed, all praise and gratitude are due to Him for it is He, “who taught (man) the use of the pen, taught man that which he knew not” (al-‘Alaq, 96: 4-5). Allah (SWT) attributes to Himself the progress of knowledge man has made through the pen. The prophet was instructed to supplicate, “And say: ‘O my Lord increase me in knowledge’” (Ta Ha, 20:114).

The kind of knowledge Adam received thus far may be classified as acquired knowledge based on ‘ilm al-asma’, onomatology and onomasiology. There is another category of knowledge that is equally important for the role of khilafah, which is revealed knowledge. Imam al-Sahfi’ (RA) once said, “Knowledge is of two types, knowledge of the physical bodies and religious knowledge.”

Science may have unraveled the truth about the secrets of life, but man demands the whole truth. People have always wondered about our origin and existence. Even philosophers tackled such questions. What is this universe? Is there a beginning or an end? Who is man and where did he come from? And of course, the question that baffles the minds of people, what is my purpose in life?

Such metaphysical questions are beyond the reach of physical sciences, however, the urge to understand such questions are in the human mind. Indeed the branches of philosophy and metaphysical sciences deal with such subjects and philosophers and metaphysicists among other scholars through the exercise of their intellect and logic generate hypotheses and theoretical assumptions.

Allah (SWT) in His infinite wisdom did not leave man to wander in the alleys of his imagination with no real answers. He (SWT) made sure that Adam and his progeny received the truth. The true realities of man and the universe have been foretold to us by the very originator of man and the universe, Allah (SWT). The total truth appears in the Qur’an, the last and final scripture intended for all of humanity. Such mysteries are no longer secret.

Upon concluding the training course and prior to taking charge of the world as khalifah, Adam was given specific instructions, “When guidance comes from Me, as it certainly will, there shall be no fear for those who follow My guidance nor shall they grieve” (al-Baqarah, 2:38). This is the other type of knowledge where correct answers to the metaphysical questions humans have always struggled with are found.

Acquired knowledge is obtained actively through the sense organs. Revealed knowledge, on the other hand, is attained passively. It is a revelation revealed to prophets and messengers of Allah (SWT). They, in turn, impart this knowledge to the rest of humanity.
In conclusion, both acquired and revealed knowledge are tremendously important. They form the basis or foundation of the caliphate. Whoever excels in the field of sciences is given the opportunity to rule. Bear in mind that Adam’s rule was on the basis of “ilm al-asma’.” America and the West are on top of the world because of their outstanding achievements in all fields of social and physical sciences, but as Sir Isaac Newton pointed out, it is only by ‘standing on the shoulder of giants.’

There was a time when Muslims were on top of the world. For several hundred years, Muslims excelled in all fields of science. They built upon what Indians, Chinese and Greeks postulated and became experts in mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry and medicine, among other fields. Through the universities of Spain, Granada and Cordoba, they transferred that knowledge to the people of France, Germany and Italy. In turn, those Western civilizations built upon the knowledge they received while Muslims fell into deep slumber.

Unless acquired knowledge is complemented by revealed guidance, there is no guarantee that one may succeed in both worlds, the here and now as well as the hereafter. Islam stresses both types of knowledge as equally important. The Prophet (SAW) recognized their importance when he (SAW) stressed, “Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim.” We may also be reminded, that the first word revealed to Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was, “Read.”