

The Quran and its Message

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سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

HOW MANY ANGELS WERE TALKING TO MARY?

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The following inability to effectively reconcile verses of the Quran is mistakenly oft cited as a contradiction in the Quran by some who are unduly critical towards its contents.

CLAIM

There is a contradiction in verse 19:19 where only one angel is noted giving glad tidings of a son and yet in verse 3:45, there are more than one angels (plural) speaking with Mary.

019:019

"He said: "Indeed, I am only a messenger from thy Lord, (to announce) to thee the gift of a holy son"

003:045 (part)

"When the angels said: O Mary, indeed God gives you good news with a Word from Him..."

RESPONSE

A simple understanding of the Quran reveals that from one verse to another the addressees can change, the context can change as can the situation and time. However, primarily the underlying theme remains constant.

Let us take an example of four verses one after the other in Surah Al-Imran (Chapter 3) which captures a narrative between Prophet Zakariya (pbuh) and the angels.

003:038-41

"There did Zakariya pray to his Lord, saying: "O my Lord! Grant to me from Thee a progeny that is pure. Indeed, You Are He that hears prayer!" While he was standing in prayer in the chamber, the angels called to him: "God does give you glad tidings of Yahya, confirming a Word from God, and (besides) noble, chaste, and a prophet, - of the company of the righteous." He said: "O my Lord! How shall I have son, seeing I am very old, and my wife is barren?" "Thus," was the answer, "God does what He wills." He said: "O my Lord! Give me a Sign!". "Your Sign," (was the answer) "Shall be that you shall not speak to people for three days but with signals. Then celebrate the praises of thy Lord again and again (much), and glorify Him in the evening and in the morning."

One now notes suddenly, that in the next verse, whilst the underlying context of the theme remains the same (angels imparting some kind of good news, in this case, the birth of a child), **the time has changed**, the addressee has changed. One now reads a narrative captured between Mary and the angels which follows into the good news of her own righteous child (3:45-46).

003:042

"And when **the angels said**: O Mary! surely God has chosen you and purified you and chosen you above the women of the world"

Even though the 'wa' (and) prefixed conjunction is used between the end of verse 41 and the start of 42, this does not imply that Mary was alongside Prophet Zakariya ^(pbuh) during the three days or whether the narrative even refers to the same point in time.

This example has been intentionally chosen. Albeit the verses noted above deal with separate subjects (Mary and Prophet Zakariya), ^(pbu-them) within the context of the verses and what follows, it is clear that the Quran is not averse from shifting from one time period to another whilst keeping the theme constant.

It is therefore important to appreciate the construct and style of the Quran whilst subjecting the verses to scrutiny.

SAME THEME WITH TIME SHIFT

Similarly and in continuation with its previous verses, we note a conversation between the angels (plural) and Mary with regards the good news of Prophet Jesus. ^(pbuh)

003:045-46

"When the **angels said**: O Mary, indeed God gives you good news with a Word from Him (of one) whose name is the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, worthy of regard in this world and the hereafter and of those who brought near (to God). And he shall speak to the people when in the cradle and in maturity, and (he shall be) one of the righteous."

However in the very next verse 3.47, whilst the addressee (Mary) remains the same, the speaker (angel) and time has changed. This is now clearly a reference to **a different period, a different situation**. As shown above, just because the verse follows one after the other or the theme remains constant 'glad tidings of a child', the period does not always need to remain the same. In this case the same news could have been imparted twice, first as a suggestion and the second time in more revealing manner as will be noted in the following verse.

003.047

"She said: "O my Lord! **How shall I have a son when no man has touched me?**" He said: "Even so: **God creates what He wills: When He has decreed a matter, He but says to it, 'Be,' and it becomes!**"

It remains significant to note here, that the verse refers to an angel in the 3rd person **singular** masculine (i.e. He said) which is **consistent** with verses 19.17-21 which appear to be capturing the same point in time. This is not the same period captured in 3:45-46.

019.017-21

"Then she took from them a screen. Then We sent her Our spirit, and he appeared before her as a man well proportioned (perfect man). She said: "Indeed, I seek refuge with the Most Gracious (with God) from you if you are God fearing." He said: "Indeed, I am only a messenger from thy Lord, (to announce) to you the gift of a holy son. She said: "How shall I have a son, when no man has touched me, and I am not unchaste?" He said: "Thus (it will be) : Thy Lord says, 'that is easy for Me: and (We wish) to appoint him as a Sign unto men and a Mercy from Us'. It is a matter (so) decreed."

Therefore, it is clear that the period noted in verse 3:47 is the same as that noted in verses 19:17-21 by virtue of the type of question that Mary asked "**How shall I have a son when no man has touched me?**". Therefore, the use of the 'singular' angel is consistent between 19:17-21 and 3:47. On the other hand, verse 3:45-46 alludes to a different time period where one notes no such statement by Mary.

It is however important to note, if the speaker (in reference to the angel) in verse 3.47 remained plural (angels) as in verses 3:45-46, then this would have indeed amounted to a **contradiction** with verses 19.17-21 where clearly **one** angel, **in a male** form was sent when this particular discussion took place.

However, no such contradiction exists.

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