

The Quran and its Message

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سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

FASTING IS PRESCRIBED UNTIL NIGHT NOT SUNSET

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Many Muslims accept the traditional belief that fasting is prescribed till sunset and that night begins at the point of sunset. Though an extremely popular view, this assertion is difficult to **support** completely from the Quran's perspective which we will note below.

The Quran clearly states that fasting is to be initiated before sunrise (at dawn) **and is to be completed until 'night' (Arabic: *layl*)**.

002:187 (Part)

"...and eat and drink, until the white thread of dawn appears to you distinct from its black thread. Then complete the fast **till the night (Arabic: *layl*)...**"

The first point to note is that dawn **is not** synonymous with sunrise and is the period at which the sun starts to lighten the sky **whilst remaining well below the horizon**. The **assessment** is one of **perception** for the observer and is not intended to be an exact science.

As dawn continues, a distinctive colour in the form of a thin thread is visible on the horizon. The sky starts to lighten up until the point of sunrise when the sun's light fully breaks and sunrise is fully observed.

Please see related article [1] below.

DESCRIPTIONS OF SUNSET IN THE QURAN

The Quran makes use of the word '*layl*' as a word well known to the Arabs to describe a particular part(s) of the complete day. A **gradual movement** into the night is certainly implied by the Quran which we will note later in the article. However, it is to be noted that at no place in the Quran is '*layl*' (night) **synonymous** with sunset. In fact, descriptions of **sunset** are clearly expressed by the Quran in Arabic.

018:086

"Until when he reached the setting of the sun (Arabic: Maghriba-l-shams)"

The Arabic word '*maghriba*' (verb: *gharaba*) comes from its root word '*Ghurub*' (G-R-B) which inherently means to retire, to depart, to be hidden from view or to be absent. Used along with '*shams*' (sun) it refers to sunset, or the west which is clearly the setting place of the sun.

Verse 2:187 does not instruct believers to fast until the '*gharaba*' of the '*shams*' (setting of the sun). Rather, it informs believers to fast till '*layl*' (night).

In another verse, we note the following expression:

017:078 (part)

"Establish regular prayers - at the sun's decline (Arabic: Duluk-e-Shams) till the darkness of the night..."

Opinions on this expression are divided, but it is important to note the possible relationship with sunset.

Dhuluk = Dal-Lam-Kaf = rubbing, squeezing, pressing, decline, sinking, become red, set, incline downwards from the meridian (sun).

(TA;) and **دَكَّ** [signifies the same]. (K in art. &c.) And **دَلَّكَ عَنْتِهِ** [He rubbed his eyes]; i. e., a man looking at the setting sun. (Z, TA.) And **دَكَّتِ الْمَرْأَةُ الْعَجِيْمَ** [The woman kneaded the dough]. (TA.) And **دَكَّتِ النَّعْلَ** [

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [1]

— See also 3. — **دَكَّتِ الشَّمْسُ**, (S, Mgh, Msb, K, &c.,) aor. **دَكَّ**, (Msb,) inf. n. **دَلْوَكٌ**, (S, Mgh, &c.,) ↓ The sun set; (S, Mgh, Msb, K, &c.;) accord. to Z, because he who looks at it rubs his eyes, so that it is as though it were the rubber; (TA;) and in like manner, **النَّجُومُ** the stars: (Msb:) or became yellow, (K, TA,) and inclined to setting: (TA:) or declined (K, * TA) so that the beholder almost required, when looking at it, to contract the rays from his eyes with the palm of his hand: (TA:) or declined after mid-

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [2]

In another verse of the Quran we note the expression '*shafaq*' as a twilight glow in the evening after sunset. It is interesting to note that '*layl*' (night) is somewhat separated from '*shafaq*' but nevertheless, is a process which gradually occurs.

084:16-17

"But nay! I swear by the sunset redness / twilight glow (**Arabic: bil-shafaq**), And the night (**Arabic: al-layl**) and that which it drives on"

The Quran has also clearly cited the term '*ghurub*' to denote sunset (20:130 and 50:39) in other verses of the Quran.

020:130

"...before the rising of the sun, and before its setting (**Arabic: ghurubiha**)"

050:039

"...before the rising of the sun and before the setting (**Arabic: ghurubiha**)"

As the term '*ghurub*' is well known to the Quran, it could have utilised such a term unequivocally to denote the ending of the fasting period **without any ambiguity**. However, it simply **did not**. Instead, it used the word '*layl*' (night) to describe the period of the fast's end.

Please see related article [2] below which presents the meaning of '**Ghurub**'.

COMPLETE / TOTAL NIGHT (LAYL)

Complete / total night (Arabic: *layl*) is not the point at sunset where there is still **discernible** light in the sky, but rather, it is the point when the sunlight has completely vanished from the sky (i.e. night). This is the point at which **all twilight ends** (when there is no scattered light in the sky from the sun).

Furthermore, it is clear from verses 91:1-4 that '*layl*' (night) is the point at which **both** the sun **and** its light or brilliance is concealed.

091.001-4

"By the Sun and its brightness (splendour, brightness, brilliance - **duha**) and the moon when it follows it and the day (**Arabic: nahar**) when it displays it (sun's glory) and the night (**Arabic: layl**) when it covers / conceals it"

This is the point when the day (*nahar*), which constitutes both the sun and its light, is completely concealed. If only the sun is concealed (*ghurub*), but its light is still evident in the sky as in sunset, this is arguably not complete '*layl*' (night)

Therefore, '*nahar*' (daytime) which is contrasted with '*layl*' (night) can be understood as the period where there is a '*spreading of the light*' and its '*dispersion*' for the purposes of sight.

This is also supported by the Quran.

010:067

"He who made for you the night to repose in it / rest, and the day (**nahara**), to see / giving visibility (**mubsiran**)"

At sunset one does not lose visibility.

The necessity of 'light' for '**nahar**' is also recognised by Arabic lexicons which can be perused in the reference article [3] below.

In other words, '**nahar**' is simply **not** a period from sunrise as commonly understood but in its classical sense, signifies the period from the point of **dawn** where there is a '*spreading of the light*' for **sight** before the sun rises and therefore from a Quran's perspective, should continue until discernible visibility remains (after sunset). Once this disappears, night (**layl**) begins.

Please also note below examples of the usage of '**layl**' in the Quran to clearly denote a part of night which is not synonymous with sunset.

025.047

"And He it is Who made the night (**Arabic: al-layla**) as a robe / covering for you and sleep as rest and makes the Day (as it were) a Resurrection"

034.018

"And We made between them and the towns which We had blessed, towns easy to be seen, and We made stages of journey between them easy, (saying): Travel in them safely both by night (**Arabic: layliya**) and day."

073.020 (Part)

"Indeed your Lord knows that you stand forth (to prayer) nearly two-thirds of the night (**Arabic: al-layli**), or half it or a third of it, and so do a party of those with you..."

It would be difficult to accept that any of the above references to '**layl**' are referring to the point at sunset. Therefore, complete '**layl**' is a reference to night, when the sky is completely devoid of sunlight.

In verse 79:29 of the Quran, we note another powerful definition of complete '**layl**' as night being devoid of light (dark).

079:029

"And He darkened its night (**Arabic: layla-ha**) and brought out its brightness"

SO WHEN DOES 'LAYL' (NIGHT) ACTUALLY BEGIN?

As mentioned earlier in the article, a gradual movement into the night (**layl**) is **certainly implied** by the Quran and arguably the onset of night would not necessarily mean to imply total darkness.

Total darkness is described elsewhere in the Quran such as '*al-layli muzliman'* (10:27) or '*ghasaq al-layl*' (17:78).

The Quran even makes use of the word '**Isha**' to denote a **period** which corresponds to the segment of the night when there is total darkness (12:16). Muslims will be familiar with the prayer that is offered at night (*Salat al-Isha* - 24:58)

Neither of these expressions or the like are used to describe the culmination of the fast. Furthermore, the fact that 'night' (*layl*) is segmented into parts is clearly implied by many other verses of the Quran (11:81) as is the **emergence** of night as a **gradual process which begins before total darkness**.

022.061

"That is because God merges night into day, and He merges day into night, and verily it is God Who hears and sees (all things)."

031.029 (part)

"Do you not see that God merges night into day and he merges day into night..."

074:33-34

"And the night (**Arabic: al-layl**) when it departs (**Arabic: adbara**) and the morning when it brightens"

In the above verses (74:33-34), the slow departure of the night is clearly implied. Therefore, the reverse would also be implied when one slowly enters into the period of the night sealing the interpretation of a gradual movement into '*layl*' (night).

1. THE SUN'S REDDISH GLOW IMMEDIATELY AFTER SUNSET

We noted earlier a verse of the Quran where two Divine oaths were presented. The first oath was against '*shafaq*' describing the twilight reddish glow in the evening horizon after sunset and the second was against '*layl*' (night) which seemingly followed it as a gradual process of enshrouding it.

084:16-17

"But nay! I swear by the sunset redness / twilight glow (**Arabic: bil-shafaq**) and the night (**Arabic: al-layl**) and that what it envelops / enshrouds / gathers / drives on (**Arabic: wasaqa**)"

Lexicons refer to the Arabic word '*shafaq*' as the redness / reddish hue in the horizon immediately after sunset.

signifies The redness (Kh, S, Mṣb, K) in the horizon (K) from sunset until the time of the last عشاء [i. e. nightfall], (Kh, S, Mṣb, K,) when it disappears, (Kh, S, Mṣb,) and the white شفق remains until the middle [or rather until a late period varying at different seasons] of the night: (Mṣb :) or until near that time: or until near the آنecer [q. v., generally meaning the same, or nearly so]: (K:) or the redness that is seen in the sky at sunset: (IDrd, O :) or the remains of the light and redness of the sun in the first part of the night, until near the آنecer: (S:) or the light and redness of the sun, seen at sunset, until the time of the prayer of nightfall: (M :) or the mixture of the light of day with the blackness of night at sunset: (Er-Rāghib, TA :) accord. to Zj, the redness that is in the region of sunset after the setting of the sun: this is the meaning given as of common repute in the books of lexicology; and

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [3]

As can be noted, '*layl*' (night) appears to be somewhat separated from '*shafaq*' (as given by the need of two separate oaths) and arguably arrives after the immediate redness (*shafaq*) has started to visibly disappear. Once again, the word '*shafaq*' is known to the Quran and if the intention was to fast till the arrival of such a twilight period, then one would have expected the Quran to unequivocally state this, which it did not.

2. PROPHET ABRAHAM'S (pbuh) EXAMPLE

We also have noted earlier in the article that the start of fasting was based on an observer's perception "...until the white thread of dawn appears to you distinct from its black thread..." (2:187).

Similarly, the Quran does not make use of any known expression to describe sunset as the end of the fasting period, but uses the expression '*layl*' (night) as a perception to end fasting. We also noted that the onset of '*layl*' did not imply the darkness of the night which again, the Quran has many other expressions for.

Arguably, another good perception of '*night*' is when the earliest stars / planets start to become visible in the sky.

The Quran makes use of the Arabic word '*kawkab'an*' which in its indefinite form (as in 6:76) is used to imply a star or stars (12:4), but in its definite form (*al-kawkab*) is also used to describe planet Venus, which is an early twilight planet. In the following verse we note the appearance of '*kawkab'*

used along with the onset of 'night' which arguably **would be a short period after sunset** when stars / planets begin to appear **but well before total darkness.**

006.076

When the night (**Arabic: al-laylu**) covered over him, He saw a star (**Arabic: kawkab'an**): He said: "This is my Lord." But when it set, He said: "I love not those that set."

كَوْكِبٌ i.q. نَجْمٌ, A star; an asterism; a constellation: as also كَوْكِبَةٌ: (S, K:) or الكوكبة is an appellation given to the planet Venus; and for the rest of the stars, the masc. word كَوْكَبٌ is used: (Az:) but Venus is called also الكوكب. (MF.) [Pl. كَوَافِيدٌ.] —

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [4]

FINAL THOUGHTS

Despite popular practice and understanding, the Quranic usage of '**layl**' appears **not to be synonymous** with 'sunset' (**ghurub**). The Quranic command remains unequivocal.

Fasting has been prescribed from dawn till the start of '**night**' which is arguably a short period after sunset **but not at sunset**. The article has posited that the onset of night initiates from the point once the initial reddish hue of sunset has visibly started to disappear or when the earliest stars / planets start to appear.

002:187 (Part)

"...and eat and drink, until the white thread of dawn appears to you distinct from its black thread. Then complete the fast **till the night (Arabic: layl)**..."

It undoubtedly remains an individual responsibility to assess the information that reaches one.

017.036

"And do not follow that of which you have no knowledge. Indeed! the hearing and the sight and the heart - of each of these you will be questioned"

Please see related articles:

- (1) [Time of Fajr and the End of Sehri in the Month of Ramadan](#)
- (2) [Ghurub](#)
- (3) [Nahar](#)

REFERENCES

[1] LANE. E.W, **Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 3, Page 906**

Highlights marked in red on the lexicon excerpt are my own insertions. They have no bearing on the original text other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] LANE. E.W, **Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 4, Page 1573**

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[4] LANE. E.W, **Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 7, Page 2623**

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