

# The Quran and its Message

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سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

## THE SEVEN OFT-REPEATED

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Verse 15:87 of the Quran has been the source of considerable debate in Muslim thinking where the Arabic words '**saba'an minal-mathani**' appear.

**015:087**

"And certainly, We have given you **seven of the oft-repeated (Arabic: saba'an minal-mathani)** and the great Quran"

(read right to left)

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَاكَ سَبْعًا مِّنَ الْمَثَانِي وَالْقُرْآنَ الْعَظِيمَ

saba'an minal-mathani

Illustration - Joseph Islam

The opinion favoured by those who adhere to the main traditional position is that the 'seven of the oft-repeated' refers to the 7 verses of Surah Fateha.

Quite apart from the fact that verse 15:87 above makes no mention to 'verses' (ayat), we note a similar expression in another verse of the Quran (39:23). In this verse, one notes that the expression 'mathaniya' is clearly used to denote the Quran's capacity to advance and repeat it's teaching in a multifaceted manner, remaining fully consistent with itself at all times.

### 039:023 (part)

"God has revealed the best statement in the form of a Book consistent with itself yet oft-repeating (Arabic: mathaniya)..."

'Mathani' means a **repetition**, or something which is **oft-repeated**, such as parts or narratives of the Quran. It is not to be confused with the term 'mathna' of the same root, which means by two's or pairs.

### SEVEN OR SEVERAL?

In an article entitled "[Are there Seven Heavens or Several Heavens?](#)", it was argued that though 'saba' can denote 'seven' in the Arabic language, it also means a vague number, seven or more, or indeed a **multiplicity**.

(K.) — See also **أسبوع**; last sentence. — **سبعة** is also used in a vague manner, as meaning Seven or more; or several; or many; as Bd says, in ix. 81, and as is indicated, though not plainly declared, in the TA. See 2: and see also **سبعون**.

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [1]

This understanding was supported not only with well attested classical lexicon authorities, but more importantly from the Quran where verses clearly denoted a '**multiplicity**' when the word 'saba' was utilised.

For example, we note in the following verse:

### 031:027

"And if all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea, with seven / [several] more seas to help it, (were ink), the words of God could not be exhausted. Lo! God is Mighty, Wise"

If we note the theme of the above verse, specifically with regards the 'sea', it becomes clear that the 'seven' denotes a multiplicity if compared with a similar verse below (18:109) which carries the same theme.

### 018:109

"Say: If the sea were ink for the words of my Lord, the sea would surely be consumed before the words of my Lord are exhausted, though We were to bring the like of that (sea) to supplement""

'Saba' is also used to denote the number of heavens in numerous verses in the Quran and as in the example below.

**002:029**

"He it is Who created for you all that is in the earth. Then turned He to the heaven, and fashioned it as **seven (Arabic: Saba) heavens**. And He is knower of all things"

إِلَى السَّمَاءِ فَسَوَّاهُنَّ سَبْعَ سَمَوَاتٍ

Saba

Illustration - Joseph Islam

However, one notes in the verse below, which deals with the heavens, the number of **Earths** are also mentioned with a **similar likeness** as that of the heavens. It would be untenable to accept the proposition based on the conventional understanding of 'seven' literal heavens, that there are then only '7 earths of the like'. This would be an unwarranted, restrictive interpretation, not only linguistically, but also scientifically.

**065:012**

"God is He Who created seven heavens, **and of the Earth the like of them**; the decree continues to descend among them, that you may know that God has power over all things and that God indeed encompasses all things in (His) knowledge"

Other verses where a **multiplicity** is implied are:

**015:43-44**

"And surely Hell is the promised place of them all. **It has seven / [several] gates**; for every gate there shall be a separate party of them"

**002:261**

"The parable of those who spend their substance in the way of God is that of a grain of corn: **it grows seven / [several] ears**, and each ear has a hundred grains. God gives **manifold increase** to whom He pleases: And God cares for all and He knows all things"

It is evident therefore, that the Arabic usage of the number seven can also denote a multiplicity and should not only be interpreted in its restrictive literal sense given every context.

If we view verse 15:87 with this multiplicity of the term 'saba' in mind, the verse would then imply **'several oft repeated'** which could be a reference to its central message which is repeated throughout the Quran in various ways. This would also be consistent with verse 39:23.

**039:023 (part)**

"God has revealed the best statement in the form of a Book consistent with itself **yet oft-repeating (Arabic: mathaniya)**..."

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONJUNCTION 'WA' (AND)

**015:087**

"And certainly, We have given you seven / several of the oft-repeated **and (Arabic: wa)** the great Quran"

Some Muslims understand the conjunction 'wa' (and) as an indication to imply something separate from the main Quran. Such an assertion takes little account of the Quranic style of dialogue which clearly uses the conjunction 'wa' in different ways.

Not only is 'wa' used in the Quran to denote something separate or additional, it is also used to elucidate an existing statement by defining it or clarifying it.

For example, in the following verse, we note:

**055:068**

"In both of them (are) **fruits (Arabic: fakihatun)** **and (wa)** date-palms **and (wa)** pomegranates"

Here the conjunction 'wa' (and) when used with date-palms and pomegranates only **clarifies** the 'fruits' and is not read as separate from the category of fruits (fakihatun).

Similarly, in verse 15:87 the 'great Quran' is only an elucidation of the 'several oft-repeated' description that has been used to describe its central core message.

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## FINAL THOUGHTS

The term 'saba' (7) in the Arabic language can also denote a multiplicity. In verse 15:87 where the term 'saba'an minal-mathani' is encountered, a possible more consistent rendering 'several of the oft-repeated' was argued for. If viewed in this context, the verse could then arguably be considered as a reference to its core teachings which are repeated throughout the Quran in various ways. This would also be consistent with verse 39:23.

**Related Article:**

(1) [Are There Seven Heavens or Several Heavens?](#)

## REFERENCES

[1] LANE. E.W, Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 4, Page 1297

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.

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