

Moon Sighting¹

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In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful

The issue of moon sighting in Ramadan month has been changed into the opposite of what seems to be the God's purpose for sanctification of fasting. Although we cannot decisively claim what the purpose of God is, one of the purposes, which is also an essential and important goal of our life, fundamentally is to create unity among all Muslims. For instance, when a person sees a fasting person, since s/he, him/herself, is hungry, s/he knows that the other person is also hungry. This feeling creates a spiritual unity in the community. But unfortunately, this issue has caused schism among Muslims in different societies. It is famously said that God wanted to put Ramadan the seasoning of our food, but it has become our murderer (due to our misunderstanding). **“O Allah, forgive me for those sins which alter blessings (to curse)!”**².

This year, there were some disagreements about the first day of Ramadan; in fact, it was unknown whether Wednesday or Thursday was the first day of Ramadan. However, the problem was solvable in a way that those who fasted on Wednesday, if it later became clear that Wednesday has not been the first day, their fasting was considered *mustahab* (recommended). It is certain that God will not spoil any action that the believer has done with a good intention, and he will definitely never consider it as a sin. However, in some jurisprudential judgments (*fatwas*), it is stated that if someone fasts with the intention that it is the first day of Ramadan and then, it becomes clear that it was not Ramadan, s/he has made an unlawful (*haram*) deed. Of course, it was better to explain and clarify that if someone him/herself claims that it is Ramadan, while in none of the usual ways, it has been proved to him/her and s/he, with no reason, is saying that today is Ramadan, s/he is doing a wrong deed and is to be punished. In such a case, he will be asked “how does it relate to you whether it is Ramadan or not”; nonetheless, his fast will be accepted according to the God's word: **“So whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it”**³.

Of course, the judgment (*fatwa*) that clergymen issued last year and were also published in some newspapers, could largely solve the problem. They declared that those who fasted on Wednesday (whether it was Ramadan or not) have not done a wrongful act and their reward will be saved by God.

Now, this problem has similarly arisen in the end of Ramadan. In the beginning of Ramadan,

¹ This text is a summary of the speech of His Honorable Haj Dr. Nour-Ali Tabandeh (Majzoob-Ali-Shah) on Thursday morning (2002.12.05).

² Doa Kumail, “اللَّهُمَّ اغْفِرْ لِي الدُّنُوبَ الَّتِي تُغَيِّرُ النِّعَمَ”.

³ Quran, Surah: Al-Zelzal, Verse: 7, “فَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ خَيْرًا يَرَهُ”.

the problem is solvable, since it is called the “doubtful day” (*Yowm ul-Shak*) and we can fast. But in the end of Ramadan, when we do not know the first day of Shawwal month, we will face a serious problem. If it would be the first day of Shawwal month (i.e., the moon has been sighted), fasting would be unlawful (*haram*); but if would be the last day of Ramadan month, fasting would be obligatory (*wajib*). In addition, while the obligatory (*wajib*) and recommended (*mustahab*) deeds, and the obligatory (*wajib*) and disapproved (*makruh*) deeds can be added up, but obligatory and unlawful deeds cannot be summed. Thus, what is our duty? For example, if it is announced in Dubai that the moon has been sighted and today (Thursday) is Eid al-Fitr, what should we do in Iran? Nowadays, airplanes can travel from Tehran to Dubai in one hour; so, if today at noon, I depart from Tehran to Dubai while I am fasting, my fasting will not be invalid; but when I arrive in Dubai, where Eid al-Fitr has been announced, imagine if they bring me a cup of tea, what should I do? If I do not drink, they will say you are doing wrong, why are you fasting!?

Therefore, as I said above, this Eid, which has been sanctified by God for Muslims’ unity, has been changed into schism, and instead of being the seasoning of our food, has become the murderer of our spirit (due to our misunderstanding).

This issue should, of course, be examined by Shia and Sunni jurisconsults and a solution should be found. It is said that the beginning of a month, whether Shawwal or Ramadan, can be determined by sighting the moon. The ancients said that the astrologers’ words are unacceptable in this area; however, they meant the sayings of people, who observed the movement of stars, the moon, the sun, etc., and suggested to do (or not to do) an action. For instance, it is mentioned that Imam Ali (AS) wanted to go to a war; he was on his way, when an astrologer came and said: “the time is unlucky and unsuitable, and you should not go”. Imam responded: “put these words away. No one knows the unseen, except God”. And he went on. The words of these astrologers were not acceptable for Imam. It should be noted that in the past, astrologers were known separate from “astronomers”, who knew astronomy science. Astronomy is the science of the apparent cycles of the moon, the sun, stars, etc. This science involves the mathematical calculations about how the sun moves, whether the moon has enough distance from the sun to be sighted from it, or not, etc. In general, astronomy calculates such things. As no one asks an astrologer in his/her office about how to sum the numbers in a page, it is the same for the moon arrival. Everyone uses a calculator to sum up that page and write the answer and the summation is reliable, unless the calculator is broken; in such a situation, s/he will use another calculator. But here, the God’s calculator is not broken. God says: “**Falsehood cannot approach it from before it or from behind it**”¹. In another verse, God says: “**He taught Adam the names - all of them**”². That is why the scientists can accurately calculate when the sun sets and when the moon sets.

Today, it has been realized that in the issue of moon sighting, the distance between the sun and the moon (i.e., eccentricity) should be twelve degrees. To elaborate more, if you light a candle in front of a shiny lamp, you will not be able to see the candle, but you will see the lamp; now, if you move the candle away from the lamp, it will reach a distance from which the candle can be seen; the sun and the moon are also the same. When the moon is close to the sun, it cannot be seen; but as it gradually goes farther, when it gets a twelve-degree distance, it

¹ Quran, Surah: Fussilat, Verse 42, “لَا يَأْتِيهِ الْبَاطِلُ مِنْ بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ”.

² Quran, Surah: Al-Baqarah, Verse 31, “عَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا”.

can be sighted. While the moon can be sighted, but sighting needs some other conditions as well, which have been stated by physicians (such as weather conditions). For example, they have mentioned that the weather should not be cloudy, and the light reflection should have particular conditions, and so on. When all of these conditions are met, the moon can be sighted. These calculations have been completely precise till today. For instance, Khayyam, who lived about thousand years ago, has correctly predicted all solar and lunar eclipses for the next thousand years after himself, and none of them have been wrong. Actually, they are logical calculations. If one calculates an invoice of his/her business with a calculator, s/he will obtain the same value as with another calculator or an abacus; overall, the more precise calculator will be important for us.

In here, if we only consider moon sighting as our main measure, such problems can be exposed. In fact, it is likely that in the last few days of Ramadan month, no one could see the moon and would have no information about anywhere else; in such a situation, would it be correct for him/her to wait until the fifteenth day of the month until the full moon appears and then, s/he would say it is Shawwal month, because now, I have just clearly saw the moon! The holy Quran says: **“They ask you, [O! Muhammad], about the new moons. Say, “They are measurements of time for the people and for Hajj”**”¹; thus, shouldn't we give credit to a moon sighting method, other than the crescent sighting? In books and practical treatises, some says that there are several ways for confirming the arrival of Shawwal, Ramadan, or any other month: one method is sighting the crescent; another method is that two just witnesses say that they have seen the moon. In the former method, if someone sees the moon, s/he will be obliged to fast, since s/he, him/herself, has seen the moon of the beginning of Ramadan month. But in the case of two just witnesses, being a just person, at the same time can involve the possibility of seeing different objects. What should we do if a person, who cannot see objects from a short distance, comes and says that I have seen the moon? In Masnavi, there is a story about this issue: during Umar's caliphate, even if a person swore that he had seen the moon, no one else claimed it. Because, in Saudi Arabia, the weather was always clear and it, later, became clear that he had not seen the moon, but the hair of his eyebrow, and had made a mistake. But at the present time, if someone claims that he has seen the moon, can we conclude not to fast tomorrow based on his word? It is, of course, not true in our time. Because there are many communication devices and if the moon is seen, many will see it and we will get informed. But in the past, or in a village where there is no communication device, the situation is different. Even now, these kinds of villages still exist. For example, when I worked in the justice department in the city of Mashhad, I went for a local investigation, to a village, located seven or eight Farsakhs (i.e., approx. 42-48 kilometers) away from Mashhad. In there, I talked to oldmen and tried to use their experiences, along doing my duties. One of them said that I wish to go to the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza (AS). I told him: “haven't you ever been there?” He replied: “no”. While the village was located in only seven or eight Farsakhs away from Mashhad; but he had not gone to Mashhad with the vehicles such as a car, or even a bicycle. Now, what should we do if someone in this village has seen the moon? No matter how hard he shouts that I have seen the moon, his testimony is not enough; while we must fast, he can avoid fasting and he has the right to do so. In fact, his saying would be a proof for himself and he would be like a clergyman that following is forbidden for him. He must perform whatever he believes, even if no one follows him. In several books, I have seen that some clergymen have proposed that an authority council should be appointed, where tasks

¹ Quran, Surah: Al-Baqarah, Verse 189, “يَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الْأَهْلِ قُلْ هِيَ مَوَاقِيتُ لِلنَّاسِ وَالْحَجِّ”.

would be decided for all people. Considering the fact that all experts believe in both methods, they can gather and state that a day will be the first day of the month, provided that someone comes and says that I have seen the moon, or if it is confirmed through confidence (as some experts believe) or certainty (as some others state).

But how can we actually be certain, without using the astronomical calculations? There is a mistake here; some people only believe in the words and the appearance of religious issues. For example, if a person is not deeply focused in his/her prayer, but after his/her prayer, if s/he says a specific word or phrase one hundred and ten times, they will say that there is not any better prayer than his/hers. This is while s/he has forgotten the meaning and the purpose, and has only adhered to the surface. This fact is the same as when you intend to travel to Mashhad, but once you reach beautiful places, you would stop and stay, and say: “well, this place is good and we will stay here”. We all know that those beautiful places have been only a medium or an intermediary on the way, and the purpose has been something else. Such a situation is similarly true for moon sighting. Moon sighting is only a medium. Unfortunately, some people have been trying to find a way to prove the moon sighting. Whereas, moon sighting is a medium to determine the beginning of Shawwal month. While they say that with whatever medium, including sighting the moon or any other means, the beginning of the month can be proven, but they do not say that this is a procedure for proving the beginning of Shawwal; instead, they say the moon sighting should be proven. There is a joke here saying that a person saw people sighting the new moon. Then, he asked them: “what is going on?”; they replied: “we have gathered here to sight the crescent”. Once the crescent was sighted, he said: “all of you came here to sight that small moon?! In our land, the moon becomes as large as a tray but no one looks at it! Sighting the moon is not the purpose; otherwise, sighting the moon on the fourteenth night would be much more pleasant!”

Another way, which has been stated by some scholars in their treatises, is the sentence of the religious judge, which has not accepted by some others and is apparently not necessarily true. Because, the sentence of the religious judge would be a rule for us, but not for the sun, the moon, or the God’s rules. In particular, for this case, we should not say the sentence of the religious judge, but the declaration of the religious judge - which is not even definite yet. For this issue, there has been a problem-solving method from the past. Anyone who saw the moon informed the related office of the clergyman that I have seen the moon. When several just people informed the office, the clergyman could declare that this issue has been proved to him. But again, it is worth indicating that this issue is not a religious statement or judgment. Because one person may say: “what you are relying on should be also proved to me”; “those two people, who informed you, did not tell me anything and so, it has not been proven to me”. Thus, this is not an irrevocable judgment. Although if someone selects a clergyman, s/he should follow his judgments, this issue is not among the instances of his judgments and the clergyman can only state that this is what seems to be true.

That is why all of us, including a laity person (like me) and high-rank scholars, are paying attention that this issue must lead to unity. Why we are currently in a situation, where on one day, fasting is necessary for me, while for a person in Dubai, is unlawful? What should a person, going to Dubai on the same day, do? Or what is the obligation of another person, coming from Dubai to Tehran?

There have been many suggestions about this issue. One of them is that whenever the moon is sighted in any place on the earth, it should be declared that the moon has just been sighted and from that moment, Eid Al-Fitr should be announced all around the world. It is an opinion, which is highly unlikely to be accepted by all people, but this kind of solution expresses that it

is true that fasting is necessary during Ramadan month and is forbidden at the first day of Shawwal (Eid Al-Fitr), but there is another implicit necessary statement, which is the unity among Muslims. Now, we should decide which one is more essential based on the current situation of the world. This point would be a reasonable guide for solving the problem.

Another suggested solution is that if the moon is sighted in the places, where it is night time (i.e., before the Morning Prayer time, when it is not the fasting time), Eid Al-Fitr should be announced. This will partly solve the problem, but again will divide the earth into two parts: where it is night time, and where it is day time.

Here, the common fact, in accordance with the astronomical rules, is that wherever the moon is sighted, it will be only valid for the nearby places; but what are the nearby places? For example, can we say that Karaj is close to Tehran? Is Islam-Shahr close to Tehran? Thus, it would be more precise to state that wherever the moon is sighted, it will be an assertion for the west side, but not the east side. Therefore, if the moon is sighted in Tehran, it will not be an assertion for Mashhad, Sabzevar, Shahrood, Gonabad, etc., but for Kermanshah, Hamedan, and Tabriz. Although this is the current common method, we need to firstly examine, with the aid of experts (including mathematicians and astronomers), that when is the arrival of Ramadan or Shawwal months? Does the beginning of the month occur as soon as the moon exits the conjunction, or when the moon exits the eclipse (eccentricity), or when the moon is sighted? After that, a mathematical, scientific, and juridical opinion can be declared to settle the dispute.