

Qur'anic Metaphor on 'a wink of an eye': Literal or Figurative?

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In the modern digital era, one can experience the greater potential of technologies in the speed at which the data is being transferred from point-to-point or point-to-multipoint. The data in the form of electromagnetic signals are transferred at different speeds through channels such as wireless, optical fiber or copper wires. On the contrary, the object transfer from a place to another has to follow some physical laws to maintain the 'mass of the object' during the transfer procedure. According to the general theory of relativity by Albert Einstein, in a hypothetical scenario, if an object is transferred between two locations at the speed of light (299792458 m/s), the mass of the object being transferred will reach infinite and the energy required to transfer the object will become infinite.. Some studies have argued that electrically neutral particles called neutrinos can travel faster than the speed of light. However, the observation was found to be misinterpreted (Geoff Brumfiel 2012; Eugenie 2012). In contrary, the studies on the kinematics of a human blink revealed the speed of a voluntary blink takes 572 ± 25 milliseconds although only half of the time (299 ± 8 ms) was taken from the start of the blink to 97 % recovery of opening (Kwon et al., 2013). The fastest signal in our body representing rapid impulse transmission in large myelinated axons found in the neurons is identified as 70-120 m/s.

It is interesting to note that events that are happening with the fastest speed man can imagine like twinkling of an eye or faster than that had been mentioned in the Qur'an. For instance, in chapter 54, verses 49-50, the Qur'an states that God has created everything with due proportions and with due measures. In the meantime, the Qur'an mentions that the divine commands of ordering things to happen take place as fast as twinkling of an eye.

"إِنَّا كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقْنَاهُ بِقَدَرٍ، وَمَا أَمْرُنَا إِلَّا وَاحِدَةٌ كَلَمْحٍ بِالْبَصَرِ"

"Verily, all things have We created in proportion and measure. And Our Command is but a single (Act),- like the twinkling of an eye."

Same as the creation of things are duly measured, as mentioned in chapter 16, verse 77, the Last Hour (*amr al-sa'ah*); the moment of collapse of life as we know it now, takes place as quickly as the twinkling of an eye (*kalamh al-basar*).

وَلِلَّهِ غَيْبُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا أُمِرُ السَّاعَةَ إِلَّا كَلِمَةٍ الْبَصَرِ أَوْ هُوَ أَقْرَبُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ
“Allah alone has the knowledge of all the “unknown” things of the heavens and the earth. As regards the coming of the Resurrection, it will not take more time than is taken in the twinkling of an eye rather less than this; the fact is that Allah has power over all things.¹”

The terms used in these and other related verses of the Qur’an to describe the speed of events that are taking place in terms of commanding, measuring and collapsing are worth to be studied. For instance, it was from the articles of the disbelievers that they swore that God would not resurrect those who die because they assumed that the destruction of this great world and the resurrection of the bones, which are disintegrated, are impossible. God immediately annulled that He is capable of everything He desires. The verse indicates the word *sa’ah*, which literally means ‘the hour’. It refers to the knowledge of God who knew of the dominance over the time of the destruction of this world, which is among the unseen of the earth. The word ‘the twinkling of an eye (*lamh*) rather less than this (*aqrab*)’ is the subject matter of our discussion.

The word *lamh* literally means twinkling, which is a human expression of the blink of gaze or flickering eyelids. Metaphorically it refers to the arrival of the judgment day at the speed of twinkling the eye. There are two aspects of this metaphor; the first is to prove that the motion can be executed without a cost; it is much easier than moving the legs and pointing with the hand. The next is the motion itself, an ultra-fast execution by the will of God, which happens suddenly without signs such as the Holy Qur’an saying: “...All too suddenly it will come upon you”² the word ‘*baghtah*’ literally means unexpectedly occurs without warning. The point is to warn them that the hour has set them to quit from what they are in from the time of warning.

The next word for the discussion is, ‘*aw*’ literally means ‘or’ or ‘rather’, the word ‘*aw*’ is used as the transitional conjunction that is inclusive of the previous metaphor of *lamh* and exclusive of a stronger one which is faster than the ‘*lamh*’. Hence, the word ‘*aw*’ illustrates that there is something that is humanly impossible to comprehend and substantially transcend, which is even faster than the twinkling of an eye. Linguistically, it also emphasizes that the future

¹ Maududi, Tafheem al-Qur’an

² The Qur’an states:

“They ask you [Prophet] about the Hour, ‘When will it happen?’ Say, ‘My Lord alone has knowledge of it: He alone will reveal when its time will come, a time that is momentous in both the heavens and earth. All too suddenly it will come upon you.’ They ask you about it as if you were eager [to find out]. Say, ‘God alone has knowledge of [when it will come], though most people do not realize it.” [Al-A`raf: 187].

generations will be able to develop better tools or discover better ways to measure the speed of time and motion, rather than the speed at which a ‘twinkling of eye’ happens which was used by the classical Arab community to represent anything that is transported at its optimum speed in the shortest time period. Then the word *aqrab* literally means ‘the closest’, which is in this case denotes ‘less than this’, as mentioned in the Qur’an. The first interpretation refers to proximity in space, a metaphor for being in the locality of a near-intrusive thing, as Holy Qur’an says in another verse, *We are closer to him than his jugular vein*.³ Secondly, the interpretation refers to proximity in near time, that is, closer than the blink of an eye, a share that is faster than everything else.⁴

There are also two interesting events mentioned in the Holy Qur’an, in which an object is transferred with high speed from one place to another. First, ascending of prophet Mohammad (*s. a. w.*) to the highest spheres in the Night Journey event (*al-Isra’ wa al-Mi’raj*). Second, the story of Prophet Soloman (*a. s.*) with the Queen of Sheba, particularly when Solomon asked his troop on who could bring the throne of queen of Sheba (known in the Islamic literature as *Balqis*)! Then the one with the knowledge of the book said ‘*I will bring it to you in the twinkling of an eye*’⁵. It could be observed from these and other related verses of the Qur’an, that the fastest speed of an object transfer could be at the speed of a wink of an eye (299 ± 8 ms) followed by lightning (Kwon et al., 2013). Arguably, the speed of lightning propagates downward can reach 320,000 ft/s (1/3 of the speed of the light and 814 times greater than the signal transmission speed of large myelinated axons). However, when the Qur’an mentioned the incident, it refers to a clear object transfer, and it was probably the best offer of a point-point object transfer at that time (the speed of a wink of an eye). However, according to the Prophetic *hadith*, speed can neither be compared with the vision speed of a normal eye in earth or the chronological order of the placement of the speed at with the people will cross the bridge as mentioned in the hadith (*quickly as the wink of an eye, some others as quick as lightning, a strong wind, or fast horses or she-camels some will cross dragging*). This is due to the fact that the earth will be flattened on the day of judgement⁵ & ⁶ and the sun and stars will lose it lustre⁷ and eventually the calculated

³ The Qur’an states:

“We created man, We know what his soul whispers to him: We are closer to him than his jugular vein.” [Surah Qaf: 16].

⁴ Ibn Ashur, *Tafsir al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir*

⁵ “The Day when the earth will be changed to a different earth, and so will be the heavens; and (men) will be marshaled forth before Allah, The One, The Subduer.” (Qur’an, 14:48).

earthly time will be different.

In philosophical point of view, the Qur'an is not a scientific book to cross examine and revalidate what a modern science is arguing some phenomena to be an abstract truth. The Qur'an explains the issues to its audience to their level of understanding. However, the fact to be noted is that the Qur'an should not be visualized and interpreted using scientific yardsticks. However, the terminologies used in the Holy Qur'an can be further extended using cognitive perspectives to study whether the future generation will be able to develop technologies that can transfer an object from a point-to-point at the speed faster than a wink of an eye. Finally, the Holy Qur'an's ultimate goals are religious, however, the Qur'an always shifts the attention and motivates human intellect to study the natural phenomenon, providing deep insights and useful presuppositions for further study.

References

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⁶ “They ask thee concerning the mountains; say, 'My Lord will uproot them and scatter them as dust, thus He will leave them as smooth and level plains; Thou wilt not see in their place anything crooked or curved.’” (*Qur'an*, 20:105-107)

⁷ *When the sun is folded up, and when the stars fall losing their lustre (81:1-2)*