

243871 - Meteorites and shooting stars may be called “stars” (nujoom) and “heavenly bodies” (kawaakib) in Arabic

the question

Regarding ayah 5 in surah mulk where Allah SWT says: And We have certainly beautified the nearest heaven with stars and have made [from] them what is thrown at the devils and have prepared for them the punishment of the Blaze.

Ibn Kathir says in his tafsir that it is referring to meteorites and that they are made from the stars, but we know through science that meteorites have absolutely nothing to do with stars.

I know we shall not judge quran by science since science changes but I feel like this is an excuse. Science cannot tell us 100% if something is right, but it can tell us 100% that something is wrong, for example that the earth is not flat. We know 100% it is not flat, but we cant say that it is round with 100% sureness. So what is the right interpretation on this issue? This is the only argument the kuffar use which I feel is hard to refute.

Detailed answer

We do not think there is any basis for this doubt or criticism at all, and we do not believe that it deserves the description mentioned in the question, that “it is the only argument the kuffar use which ... is hard to refute”, for a simple and clear reason which no two people will dispute about. That reason is the fact that the Arabic language uses the word najm (stars) to refer to all heavenly bodies. So a luminous meteor (shihaab) may be a “najm”, a meteor (nayzak) may be a “najm” and a planet (kawkab) may be a “najm.”

As for limiting the word “najm” and using it only to refer to huge heavenly bodies that have fixed locations in the sky, are burning and emit light by themselves, such as the sun, and using the word “kawkab” to refer to solid heavenly bodies that are not burning, such as the planets of the solar system, this is modern astronomical terminology. There is nothing wrong with adopting and using this terminology, as there is no problem with the terminology itself, but it is wrong to judge the language of the Holy Quran by the terminology of later eras. Rather what we must do is understand the Holy Quran in accordance with the Arabic language, because that is the language in which the Quran was revealed. Whoever disagrees with that is like one who understands the word sayyaarah in the verse

“And there came a caravan
of travellers [sayyaarah]; they sent their water-drawer”

[Yoosuf 12:20] as

referring to the vehicle that is known nowadays in which people ride and travel by mechanical means [sayyaarah in modern Arabic means “car”] then raises an objection against the Quran by saying that cars were not invented at the time of Yoosuf (peace be upon him), so how can cars be mentioned here?!

The response – in both cases – is that it is essential to pay attention to differences in concepts and terminology, and it is essential to pay attention to the Arabic language in which the Holy Quran was revealed. Arabic does not use the word najm specifically to refer to light-emitting heavenly bodies. Rather, in Arabic, heavenly bodies may be divided into those that are fixed and those that are moving, those that are light and those that are dark. All of them may be called nujoom (plural of najm). This is how the Holy Quran uses the word. In the verse of Soorat al-Mulk mentioned, nujoom (heavenly bodies) are divided into two types: those that are lamps which illuminate the heavens, which are the light-emitting stars,

and those that move – this includes luminous meteors (shihaab), meteors (nayzak), planets (kawkab) and others. The Arabs also call these nujoom.

So there is no scientific error with regard to this matter; rather it is the matter of variation in meanings and usage.

Hence the pronoun in the verse (interpretation of the meaning) “and

We have made them (as) missiles to drive away the Shayatin (devils)”

[al-Mulk 67:5] refers to

nujoom and moving heavenly bodies. All heavenly bodies that move are called nujoom, with no hesitation, in Arabic. Thus there is no scientific problem in the verse.

There follow the views of some leading scholars of Arabic language, those who know the language and its usage well.

Al-Faraaheedi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Any of the known planets may be called najm. The word nujoom includes all the planets.

End quote from al-‘Ayn (6/154)

Ibn Saydah said:

Najm means kawkab.

End quote from al-Muhkam wa’l-Muheet al-A‘zam (7/469).

Ibn Manzoor said:

The word najm originally referred to any of the kawaakib (plural of kawkab) of the sky.

End quote from Lisaan al-'Arab (12/570)

Al-Fayroozabaadi said:

Najm means kawkab.

End quote from al-Qaamoos al-Muheet (p. 1161)

Az-Zubaydi said:

The words najm and kawkab may be used interchangeably.

End quote from Taaj al-'Uroos (4/157)

In order to confirm that, we will quote here – after researching the matter – all the places in which the words najm and kawkab appear in the Holy Qur'an so as to clearly highlight how synonymous these two terms are, and that moving astronomical bodies such as luminous meteors (shihaab) and meteors (nayzak) may also be called najm and kawkab in Arabic.

“By the star [an-najm] when it goes down, (or vanishes)”

[an-Najm 53:1]

“By the heaven, and At-Tariq (the night-comer, i.e. the bright star);

And what will make you to know what At-Tariq (night-comer) is?

(It is) the star of piercing brightness [an-najm ath-thaaqib]”

[at-Taariq 86:1-3]

“Verily! We have adorned the
near heaven with the stars [al-kawaakib] (for beauty).

And to
guard against every rebellious devil.

They
cannot listen to the higher group (angels) for they are pelted from every
side.

Outcast, and theirs is a constant (or painful) torment.

Except
such as snatch away something by stealing and they are pursued by a flaming
fire of piercing brightness [shihaabun thaaqib]”

[as-Saaffaat 37:6-10]

“And indeed, We have put the big
stars [burooj] in the heaven and We beautified it for the beholders.

And We
have guarded it (near heaven) from every outcast Shaitan (devil).

Except
him (devil) that gains hearing by stealing, he is pursued by a clear flaming
fire [shihaabun mubeen]”

[al-Hijr
15:16-18]

“And we
have sought to reach the heaven; but found it filled with stern guards and
flaming fires [shuhub].

And

verily, we used to sit there in stations, to (steal) a hearing, but any who listens now will find a flaming fire watching him in ambush [shihaaban rasada]”

[al-Jinn 72:8-9].

Another example is the report narrated in Saheeh Muslim (no. 220) from Husayn ibn ‘Abd ar-Rahmaan, who said:

I was with Sa‘eed ibn Jubayr and he said: Who among you saw the shooting star [al-kawkab alladhi anqadda] last night?

He called it a kawkab, even though it was falling and moving.

Thus it becomes clear that the shihaab (luminous meteor) and nayzak (meteor) may also – according to Arabic linguistic convention – be referred to as kawaakib and nujoom.

But not all kawaakib and nujoom can be called shihaab or nayzak.

The above is also supported by the following verses which speak of the stars being the adornment of the heaven, being used for navigation, and being put at the service of mankind. All of them may be called nujoom and also kawaakib. These verses include the following:

“and by the stars [bi’n-najm],
they (mankind) guide themselves”

[an-Nahl 16:16]

“It is He Who has set the stars

[an-nujoom] for you, so that you may guide your course with their help

through the darkness of the land and the sea. We have (indeed) explained in detail Our Ayat (proofs, evidences, verses, lessons, signs, Revelations, etc.) for people who know”

[al-An'aam 6:97]

“and (He created) the sun, the moon, the stars [an-nujoom] subjected to His Command”

[al-A'raaf 7:54]

“And He has subjected to you the night and the day, the sun and the moon; and the stars [an-nujoom] are subjected by His Command. Surely, in this are proofs for people who understand”

[an-Nahl 16:12]

“See you not that to Allah prostrates whoever is in the heavens and whoever is on the earth, and the sun, and the moon, and the stars [an-nujoom], and the mountains, and the trees, and Ad-Dawab (moving living creatures, beasts, etc.), and many of mankind? But there are many (men) on whom the punishment is justified. And whomsoever Allah disgraces, none can honour him. Verily! Allah does what He wills”

[al-Hajj 22:18]

“Then he cast a glance at the stars [an-nujoom]”

[as-Saaffaat 37:88]

“And in the night-time, also glorify His Praises, and at the setting of the stars [wa idbaar an-nujoom]”

[at-Toor 52:49]

“So I swear by Mawaqi (setting
or the mansions, etc.) of the stars [an-nujoom] (they traverse)”

[al-Waaqi’ah 56:75]

“Then when the stars [an-nujoom]
lose their lights”

[al-Mursalaat 77:8]

“When the sun Kuwwirat (wound
round and lost its light and is overthrown)

And
when the stars [an-nujoom] shall
fall”

[at-Takweer 81:1-2]

“When the night covered him over with darkness he saw a star
[kawkab]. He said: ‘This is my lord.’ But when it set, he said: ‘I like not
those that set’”

[al-An’aam 6:76]

“(Remember) when Yoosuf (Joseph) said to his father: ‘O my
father! Verily, I saw (in a dream) eleven stars [kawkab] and the sun and the
moon, I saw them prostrating themselves to me’”

[Yoosuf 12:4]

“When the heaven is cleft asunder

And when the stars [al-kawaakib] have fallen and scattered”

[al-Infitaar 82:1,2].

Thus it readily becomes clear to the reader of the Holy Quran that the Arabic language uses the word najm in a very comprehensive manner to refer to all kinds of heavenly bodies.

We do not deny that there may be some differentiation between the words najm and kawkab among some linguists, but the criterion for differentiation is size or movement and other things, not the reason as known in modern times, which is whether the body in question emits light by itself or not.

Similarly, the fact that there is a differentiation does not, under any circumstances whatsoever, mean that the words najm and kawkab cannot be used to refer to moving heavenly bodies.

Al-'Askari (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Kawkab refers to big stars; the "kawkab" of a thing is most of it.

Najm is a more general word that may refer to small or big stars.

It may be said that the kawaakib are fixed heavenly bodies.

The word najm also refers to that which rises and sets.

Hence the astrologer is called munajjim in Arabic, because he looks at those that rise and set, and he is not called mukawkib.

End quote from al-Furooq al-Lughawiyyah (p. 301)

We hope that this will easily and readily dispel the questioner's confusion.

And Allah knows best.