



The Parables and Islamic Scriptures

An Analytical Study

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Abstract

Keywords:
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Allah the exalted is the only Lord of all the worlds. He has sent Prophets and Messengers in all periods to guide the mankind. He has also revealed Divine Scriptures to edify mankind. Several Manuscripts and Books were revealed on different Prophets. The Qur'ān is the last and final word of Allah towards the humanity till the Day of Judgment. The Qur'ān teaches humanity about the Unity of Allah, love and obedience of Prophet Muhammad PBUH, methods of worship and many more. In the Qur'ān, different unique methods have been adopted for the purpose of guidance e.g. literary method, psychological, interrogative, method of telling a story of past times, etc. Parabolic method is one of these methods. In this article the significance and details of the parabolic method will be analyzed. It is the convention of Allah to teach through this method. The Apostles of Allah have also adopted this method to preach the word of Allah in an easier way.

Abstrak

Kata Kunci:
Parables,
Quran, Hadith,
Sufi Literature

Allah SWT adalah satu-satunya Tuhan seluruh alam. Dia telah mengutus para Nabi dan Rasul di segala zaman untuk memberi petunjuk kepada umat manusia. Dia juga telah mengungkapkan Kitab Suci untuk membangun umat manusia. Beberapa mushaf dan kitab diwahyukan pada

nabi-nabi yang berbeda. Al-Qur'an merupakan firman Allah yang terakhir dan terakhir terhadap umat manusia hingga hari kiamat. Al-Qur'an mengajarkan umat manusia tentang Keesaan Allah, cinta dan ketaatan kepada Nabi Muhammad SAW, tata cara beribadah dan masih banyak lagi. Dalam Al-Qur'an, berbagai metode unik telah diadopsi untuk tujuan bimbingan, misalnya. metode sastra, psikologis, interogatif, metode menceritakan kisah masa lalu, dll. Metode parabola adalah salah satu metode tersebut. Pada artikel ini pentingnya dan rincian metode parabola akan dianalisis. Sudah menjadi ketentuan Allah untuk mengajar melalui metode ini. Para Rasul Allah juga telah mengadopsi metode ini untuk menyebarkan firman Allah dengan cara yang lebih mudah.

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Introduction

The parables are found in all the books of Sematic Religions. Scholars of all times have discussed the concept and significance of the parables in great detail. In the parables Divine message is conveyed in an abstract form. Parables are different from similitudes. In parabolic method a situation is compared with another situation to deliver a message. A person can forget the words but it is easy to comprehend in the form of mental imagery. As our brain is an image processor and we perceive information of outside world with our eyes. The reader of the parables feels that he is the direct observer of the experiences mentioned in them

The Arabic word for parable is “مثل” whose root words are "م، ث، ل". There are two cognate words in the Qur'an i.e. mathal and mithāl, which appear with a significant frequency. Different scholars have explicated the literal meaning of mathal in the following words.

Aḥmad b. Fāris b. Zakriyya (395 A.H.) has elucidated the meaning of parables in these words.

الميم والشاء واللام أصل صحيح يدل على مناظره الشيء للشيء وهذا مثل هذا أي نظيره والمثل والمثال في معنى واحد وربما قالوا مثيل كشيبه تقول العرب أمثل السلطان فلانا قتله قودا والمعنى أنه فعل به مثل ما كان فعله والمثل المثل أيضا كشيبه وشبه

“Mīm and thā’ and lām is a true source that shows the analogy of the thing and this is like any counterpart, example in one sense. They may have said an analogous saying that the Arabs represent the Sultan, so we kill him with the meaning of what he did.”

Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. ‘Amr b. Aḥmad (538 A.H.) has mentioned the meaning of the parables in the following words.

ومثله به شبهه وتمثل به تشبه به ومثل الشيء بالشيء سوي به وقدر تقديره

“And like him by likeness and represented by the resemblance to him and the thing by nothing but his and his appreciation.”

Method

The method in this study uses the library research method (Sari & Asmendri, 2020) with a descriptive analysis approach because it analyzes the documents of Islamic boarding schools that have Islamic boarding school social media, which is managed by the schools themselves as data in this study. (J. W. Creswell, 2014)

Results and Discussion

Idiomatic meaning of the Parables

One of the famous and proficient scholar of Islam Allāma Ibn Taymiyya (d. 505 A.H.) summarizes the definitions of the parables (amthāl) and says

هو تشبيه شيء بشيء يتفقان في معنى من المعاني، بغرض الإيضاح والتبيين والإبراز، وهو قياس التمثيل بين شيئين لمعنى مشترك بين المقاس والمقاس عليه، وهو التعريف الذي أخذ به السلف الصالح.

“Parables mean to equate something with something that is consistent in meaning, for the purpose of illustration, articulation and highlighting, the two things which are compared and associated with each other should have a common meaning and that meaning should be in accordance with the definition taken by the righteous.”

Muhammad b. Abī Bakr Ayyūb Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751 A.H.) has mentioned the parables in following words.

وهو تشبيه شيء بشيء في حكمه وتقريب المعقول من المحسوس أو أحد المحسوسين
من الآخر واعتبار أحدهما بالآخر

“It is a metaphor of something in its wisdom and reasonable approximation
of the perceived or one of the others which are compared with each other.”

Significance of the Parables in the Qur’ān

Parables have been extensively used in the Qur’ān to teach different creeds in
an easy manner. Allah the Almighty has highlighted the significance of the parabolic
method in different verses. Some of the verses are given below.

وَتِلْكَ الْأَمْثَالُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ وَمَا يَعْقِلُهَا إِلَّا الْعَالِمُونَ

“And such are the Parables We set for mankind,
but only those understand them who have Knowledge.”

This verse is the last part of the parable known as ‘Spider’s web’. It is
mentioned here clearly that a person who observes a spider’s web and grasps a
message about reality from it, is a scholarly person in the exact sense. This openly
reveals that who are the scholars in the eyes of Allah. The persons who have
command only in bookish discourses are not the true scholars. The individuals who
are proficient of assimilating the sound advice manifest by Allah’s signs scattered in
the whole world. The scholars are ones whose minds are competent of augmenting
small occasions into great lessons.

وَلَقَدْ ضَرَبْنَا لِلنَّاسِ فِي هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ مِنْ كُلِّ مَثَلٍ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ

“We have put forth for humanity, in this Qur’ān
every kind of the Parable,”

Allah the exalted has stated that the parables have been abundantly mentioned
in the Qur’ān. The aim of the parables is not to tell a story but to teach the lessons of
spiritual wisdom.

وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ

So Allah sets forth the parables for humanity, so that they may accept
admonition.

Allah the Almighty has mentioned it again that the basic purpose to mention the parables is the admonition of the humanity.

وَتِلْكَ الْأَمْثَالُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

“such are the similitudes [parable] which We advocate to mankind, that they may contemplate.”

ضَرَبَ لَكُمْ مَثَلًا مِّنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ

“Allah the Almighty sets forth for you an example [parable] taken from your own lives.”

The Qur’ānic statements are in a language comprehensible to man and within the sphere of his observation and knowledge. That is why nobody should have any difficulty in understanding them. In this parable, it has been elucidated that the principle of the Monotheism (Oneness of Allah) as compared to polytheism is more rational and reliable with nature.

Parables can lead towards guidance or astray

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَسْتَحْيِي أَنْ يَضْرِبَ مَثَلًا مَّا بَعُوضَةً فَمَا فَوْقَهَا فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا فَيَعْلَمُونَ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ وَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فَيَقُولُونَ مَاذَا أَرَادَ اللَّهُ بِهَذَا مَثَلٌ يُضِلُّ بِهِ كَثِيرًا وَيَهْدِي بِهِ كَثِيرًا وَمَا يُضِلُّ بِهِ إِلَّا الْفَاسِقِينَ

“Allah does not disdain to give a parable about a gnat or a smaller creature. The faithful know that it is the truth from their Lord, but those who deny the truth ask, ‘What could Allah mean by this parable?’ He lets many go astray through it, and guides many by it. But He makes only the disobedient go astray”.

Significance of the Parables in the light of Hadith

The Prophet of Islam, Prophet Muhammad (peace and greetings be upon him) also used parabolic method to edify mankind. Numbers of parables are stated in the hadith literature of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and greetings be upon him). In these parables the Prophet (upon whom be peace and greetings) unfold the divine realities in a simple and familiar way. Regarding the significance of Qur’ānic parables, he said:

Hadith No. 1

نَزَلَ الْقُرْآنُ عَلَى خَمْسَةِ أَوْجُهٍ: حَلَالٍ وَحَرَامٍ وَمُحْكَمٍ وَمُتَشَابِهٍ وَأَمْثَالٍ. فَأَحِلُّوا الْحَلَالَ
وَحَرَّمُوا الْحَرَامَ وَاعْمَلُوا بِالْمُحْكَمِ وَآمِنُوا بِالْمُتَشَابِهِ وَاعْتَبِرُوا بِالْأَمْثَالِ "

“The Qur’ān has been descended on five aspects: ḥalāl (permissible), ḥarām (forbidden), muḥkam (categorical verses), mutashābihāt (allegorical verses) and the parables. So treat what is permissible as permissible and avoid the ḥarām (forbidden) and follow the arbitrator and believed in the allegorical verses and contemplate the parables.”

Hadith No. 2

عَنْ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ، قَالَ: "كَانَ الْكِتَابُ الْأَوَّلُ يَنْزِلُ مِنْ بَابٍ وَاحِدٍ
، وَعَلَى حَرْفٍ وَاحِدٍ، وَنَزَلَ الْقُرْآنُ مِنْ سَبْعَةِ أَبْوَابٍ، عَلَى سَبْعَةِ أَحْرُفٍ: زَا جِرٌ، وَآمِرٌ، وَحَلَالٌ
، وَحَرَامٌ، وَمُحْكَمٌ، وَمُتَشَابِهٌ، وَأَمْثَالٌ، فَأَحِلُّوا حَلَالَهُ، وَحَرَّمُوا حَرَامَهُ، وَافْعَلُوا مَا أَمَرْتُمْ
بِهِ، وَانْتَهُوا عَمَّا نَهَيْتُمْ عَنْهُ، وَاعْتَبِرُوا بِأَمْثَالِهِ، وَاعْمَلُوا بِمُحْكَمِهِ، وَآمِنُوا بِمُتَشَابِهِهِ، وَقُولُوا
: آمَنَّا بِهِ كُلٌّ مِنْ عِنْدِ رَبِّنَا"

The Messenger of Allah (upon whom be peace and greetings) said: “The first heavenly book was revealed from one door with one character, while the Qur’ān has been sent down from seven doors with seven characters (Seven oft-recited Verses). It admonishes, enjoins, (describes) the lawful and the unlawful, comprises firm and solid Verses (with clear and precise meaning); figurative verses (with abstract and allusive meaning), and has been revealed with parables (that make the meaning home to people). Therefore, take its lawful as lawful and unlawful as unlawful. Moreover, shun what it prohibits from; take lesson from its parables; implement its solid and firm verses and firmly believe in its figurative verses and say:

“We believe in it. The whole (Book) has been revealed by our Lord.”

Hadith No. 3

إن الله أنزل القرآن أمرًا وزاجرًا، وسنة خالية، ومثلاً مضروبًا

“Indeed, Allah has revealed Qur’ān as a commandment or as an admonition, a pathway of predecessors, and a parable that is elucidated.”

Chapter on the Parables in Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī

Imam Tirmidhī in his famous hadith book, Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī has documented an entire chapter on the parables, Abwāb al-Amthāl (The chapter on Parables). He has recorded 15 narrations in this chapter from 2859-2874. In all these narrations Prophet Muhammad (upon whom be peace and greetings) entangles difficult creeds through parables. He has taught different lessons in a simple way so that all the people can understand them.

Parables in the Musnad Ahmad bin Hanbal

عَنْ عَمْرِو بْنِ الْعَاصِ قَالَ عَقَلْتُ عَنْ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ أَلْفَ مَثَلٍ

“Amr bin al Aas has said that I have learned around 1000 parables from the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace and greetings).”

There are around 200 parables mentioned in Musnad of Ahmad bin Hanbal. In these parables Holy Prophet Muhammad (upon whom be peace and greetings) elucidated different creeds and teachings regarding Oneness of Allah, morals of a believer and so on.

Quotation of ‘Amr ibn Marah R.A

Amr ibn Marah (may Allah be pleased with him) said: If I am unable to understand the detailed meaning of any parabolic verse, then my heart hurts, I feel great distress. I am afraid that somewhere in the sight of Allah, I am counted as an ignorant person. Allah the Almighty has stated in the Qur’ān that only scholars can understand the parables.

Imam Shāfi‘ī (d. 204 A.H)

Imam Shāfi‘ī has declared this obligatory for the mujtahid (Law maker) to have command in the knowledge of parables.

Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333 A.H) quotes:

The knowledge of parables is one of the important sciences of the Qur'ān but people are unaware of its significance. This is because individuals don't try to comprehend the message of the parable in depth. They just rely on the superficial meaning of the parable.

Shaykh 'Izzudeen 'Abdul-'Aziz bin 'Abdul Salam (d. 660 A.H)

Shaykh 'Izzudeen states regarding the significance of the parables:

Allah the Almighty has included the parables in the Qur'ān to give the benefit of reminder and admonition to His servants. The parables reveal hidden nuances and are very effective in clarifying the truth. They are helpful in exposing imaginary matters in the form of research and unveil the unseen realities through the state of observation.

Abū Abdullāh Badr ad-Dīn Mohammed (d. 794 A.H)

Imam Zarkashī writes in his book al-Burhan that there is wisdom in the parables to teach narration and this is one of the characteristics of the Shariah of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him).

Significance of the Parables in Islamic Literature

Other than parables in the Qur'ān and Hadith, some parables are resulted in the form of advices of wise people or religious leaders or experiences of people's life. Such parables are known as 'ḥikmat' or 'ḥikāyat' (wisdom). Parables have been extensively used by the Islamic scholars, especially in the mystic literature of Sufis and Saints. The scholars used parables to unfold difficult matters in a simple way. Mathnawī of Mawlānā Rūm and Gulistān of Shaykh Sa'dī are very famous books in the whole world. Even Non-Muslims are also familiar with these books and they are also rendered in different languages. These books are source of guidance for the whole humanity. The main part of the Sufi literature comprises on the parables. Mathnawī Mawlānā Rūm's 26000 couplets are full of tamthīlāt parables. For example, he mentions the stories of the Kings, stories of camel and mice, stories of Laila and Majnu etc. By using parabolic method Mawlānā Rūm untangle complex matters for ordinary humans.

Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri on the Significance of Parables

In a lecture Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri manifests the significance of the parables. While describing the importance and methodology of the parables he said that

parables are used to demonstrate extremely complex topics. Difficult topics are educated with the help of evidence, induction and analogy so that every person can perceive the message easily. However, the method of parables is such an effective method that everyone can understand extremely difficult concepts. A man can as easily understand as a thirsty man feels tranquility after drinking cool water.

Similarly, different numbers of parables are recorded by the scholars of the Qur'ān. Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri has recorded 35 parables in the Qur'ānic Encyclopaedia. Allah the Almighty has also addressed mankind in His last book in the form of Parables.

Examples of the Qur'ānic Parables

Some of the examples of the parables from the Qur'ān will be discussed here.

The Parable of Spider's home

مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ أَوْلِيَاءَ كَمَثَلِ الْعَنْكَبُوتِ-إِتَّخَذَتْ بَيْتًا وَإِنَّ أَوْهَنَ

الْبُيُوتِ لَبَيْتُ الْعَنْكَبُوتِ لَوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ

“The example of those (disbelievers) who have taken others (i.e., idols) as guardians instead of Allah is like the story of a spider who builds (for herself) a house (of cobweb). And no doubt the weakest of all houses is the spider's house. Would that they knew it!”

Ibn al-Qayyim says that in this parable Allah the Almighty enlightens the fact that the creed of polytheists is very weak. The base of polytheistic doctrine is fragile. The gods they worship other than Allah are weaker than the spider's house. They will have to bear the severe torment because of their polytheism on the Day of Judgment. One who worships anyone other than Allah will be in loss and punished in both worlds. These polytheists are ruining their lives but they will not understand.

The Parable of People who read the Book but did not implement

Another example from the Qur'ān:

مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ حُمِّلُوا التَّوْرَةَ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَحْمِلُوهَا كَمَثَلِ الْحِمَارِ يَحْمِلُ أَسْفَارًا بِئْسَ مَثَلُ الْقَوْمِ

الَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الظَّالِمِينَ

“The case of those who were burdened with (the commandments and teachings of) the Torah (but) then did not bear it (i.e., this Messenger was mentioned in it, but they disbelieved in him) is like that of a donkey loaded with heavy books on its back. How evil is the example of those who have rejected Allah’s Revelations! And Allah does not guide the wrongdoers.”

Ibn al-Qayyim states that in this parable, Allah the Almighty draws an analogy of the Jews people. They carry a book, have faith in the book, and contemplate over the book but did not act upon it? They only read and memorized the book. Their recitation was without understanding they did not follow the commandments of the book. Their deeds were totally against the laws of that book. The example of these persons is similar to the donkey that carries provisions of the journey on his back but he doesn’t know what is enclosed in it. He is only lifting burden on his back. Ibn al-Qayyim said that although this was revealed for Jews. The teaching of the parable also includes Muslims who learn or memorize the Qur’ān but do not act upon the commandments of the Qur’ān.

The Parable of spending for the sake of Allah

Another parable regarding the significance of spending money in the way of Allah has been mentioned in sura al-Baqara.

مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ يُنْفِقُونَ أَمْوَالَهُمْ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ كَمَثَلِ حَبَّةٍ أَنْبَتَتْ سَبْعَ سَنَابِلٍ فِي كُلِّ سُنْبُلَةٍ
مِائَةٌ حَبَّةٌ وَاللَّهُ يُضَاعِفُ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ وَاللَّهُ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ

“The example [parable] of those who spend their wealth in the way of Allah is like (that) grain out of which seven ears shoot forth. (And then) each ear bears a hundred grains (i.e., they are rewarded seven hundred times). And Allah multiplies (still more) for whom He likes. And Allah is Infinite, All-Knowing.”

In this parable Allah the Almighty mentions the reward of those people who spend their wealth only for the sake of Allah. They spend their wealth in good reasons only to please Allah. Allah the Almighty compares their reward with planting grain. Each and every grain escalates in seven ears, and then in each ear there are 100 grains. Allah the Almighty increases the reward of every person upon many folds.

So, through these examples of the parables it will be easy to understand the whole concept of the parables. In the parables Allah speaks in the language of a lay man. He speaks in the language of human being to guide them in a familiar way. All the parables are related to the lives of human; there is not a single parable which is out of the context with human lives.

Examples of the Parables from Hadith

As mentioned earlier, the parables are found in every Hadith book. Imam Tirmidhi has recorded 15 parables in his famous Hadith book some of them are mentioned as follows:

The Parable of Dawah

أَنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ "إِنَّمَا مَثَلِي وَمَثَلُ أُمَّتِي كَمَثَلِ رَجُلٍ اسْتَوْقَدَ نَارًا فَجَعَلَتِ الذُّبَابُ وَالْفَرَاشُ يَقَعْنَ فِيهَا وَأَنَا آخِذٌ بِحُجَزِكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ تَقَحَّمُونَ فِيهَا"

“The Parable of myself and that of my Ummah is that of a man who kindled a fire, and the flies and moths began flying into it - and I am trying to prevent you from diving into it.”

Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace and greetings) elucidates the concept of his dawah (preaching) in a very simple way. He has warned the people that if they will not follow the teachings of the Last Prophet, they will have to face the wrath of Allah the Almighty.

The Parable of 5 prayers

أَنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ "أَرَأَيْتُمْ لَوْ أَنَّ نَهْرًا بِيَابِ أَحَدِكُمْ يَغْتَسِلُ مِنْهُ كُلَّ يَوْمٍ خَمْسَ مَرَّاتٍ هَلْ يَبْقَى مِنْ دَرَنِهِ شَيْءٌ". قَالُوا لَا يَبْقَى مِنْ دَرَنِهِ شَيْءٌ. قَالَ "فَذَلِكَ مَثَلُ الصَّلَوَاتِ الْخَمْسِ يَمْحُو اللَّهُ بِهِنَّ الْخَطَايَا"

“Do you think that if there was a canal by the gate of one of you, and he bathed in it five times daily that there would remain any filth on him?” They said: “No filth would stay on him.” He said: “That is the parable of the five prayers; Allah wipes out the sins with them.”

In this parable, the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace and greetings) explicates the significance of salah (prayer) in an easy manner. Every person can understand the message from this parable without any difficulty.

Reasons of using parables for teaching mankind

The parables are found in all the Divine Scriptures. All the Prophets have used this method in their times for guidance of people. There arises a question that why this method has been adopted for the teaching of mankind. The answer of this question will be analyzed here. To understand the answer of this question, one should understand the phenomenon of learning behavior.

Five Senses

We observe and experience the reality of outside environment through our senses. The human brain is dependent on these five senses to perceive any sort of information from the outside world. The job of the brain starts when the five senses send their stimuli to brain. Brain proceeds information from the response of these stimuli. The working of the brain is directly co-related with the active working of five senses. If the five senses are not working correctly and commutatively then the brain is unable to proceed any information. The brain needs clear-cut discernment from the five senses for the formation of a sound concept.

As the range of five senses is very limited so the scope of intellect is also limited. Brain and intellect are dependent on the five senses. Human beings are mortal so all organs of humans are of limited scope. Ibn 'Arabī a prominent sufi and scholar while commenting on the scope of the intellect said that;

“This is really abnormal point that people assumes that the brainpower is an extra ordinary or superlative entity and relay on his brainpower. Fact of the matter is brain and intellect are also mortal and limited like all other organs of human beings.”

It is quite evident that the brain is also an organ like all other organs. The functioning of the brain starts after receiving the information through the channel of five senses. Without that information the intellect is total null and void. That is why human being is dependent on the knowledge of Revelation for guidance and enlightenment. Human intellect can never lead to a sound concept alone. It is beyond the capacity of brain to comprehend anything alone with his help. The parables are

helpful and worthwhile for human beings as they are directed from their Lord. It is easy for human beings to understand the things that are visible to them.

Conclusion

In the light of the aforementioned citations it is categorically proved that the parabolic method is one of the best ways of teaching. That is why Allah the Almighty has taught this method to His Apostles. The Apostles of Allah frequently used this method for the guidance of the people. We should also adopt this method for the edification and guidance of young generation. This is the natural and easiest way of learning. That is why the preachers and teachers should also adopt this method at every level. It would be easier for learner to grasp the main the theme with the help of this method.

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