

## DARKNESS

## ZULUMĀT

## Definitions and Usage

Darkness (*al-zulma*, pls. *zulumāt*, *zulamāt*), linguistically defined as “the departure or absence of light” (*dhahāb al-nūr*, ‘*adam al-nūr*) (Farāhīdī; Ibn Fāris; Rāghib), is mentioned in the Qur’ān in both the literal and the metaphorical senses. The most frequent word used to denote darkness is the plural noun *zulumāt*, from the trilateral root *z-l-m*, which appears twenty-three times. In addition, two other conjugations of the root are used to refer to darkness: Form IV intransitive verb (*azlama*, “to become dark; or “it darkens”) in Q 2:20 and the active participle of Form IV verb (*muzlim*, “those in darkness”), used twice—once (Q 10:27) in the singular accusative form (*muzliman*) and once (Q 36:37) in the indefinite masculine plural form (*muzlimūna*).

The root itself occurs 315 times in 12 derived forms (‘Abd al-Bāqī). The primary meaning of *al-zulm* is to dislocate and distort a thing from its rightful place, either by way of increase or decrease, or by removing it from its rightful time and place, thus the proverbial usage *zalamtu al-siqā’* refers to milk that is kept in a container to make yoghurt but is consumed before it became yoghurt; such milk is called *zalīm* (Qurṭubī; also see Rāghib).

Majd al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb al-Fayrūzābādī (729-817/1329-1414) notes that all conjugations of the noun—*al-zulma*, *al-zuluma*, *al-zalmā’*, and *al-zalām*—refer to the disappearance of light (*dhahāb al-nūr*), and all have the same plural form, *al-zulumāt*. “Metaphorically, the noun denotes ignorance (*al-jahl*), association (*al-shirk*), and transgression (*fisq*), just as [its opposite] light denotes their antonyms (*Baṣā’ir*, *baṣīra* fī *z-l-m*; see CORRUPTION; TRANSGRESSION). In addition, its metaphorical usage also denotes disbelief (*kufīr*), fright and fear (*ahwāl*), and ignorance (*al-jahl*) (Samīn, ‘*Umdat*, bāb al-zā’, faṣl al-zā’ wa-l-lām, 3:12; ‘Askarī, *Wujūh*, al-bāb al-sābi‘ ‘*ashar fimā jā’a min al-wujūh wa-l-nazā’ir fī awwalihi zā’*; *al-zulumāt*; Bayḍawī, and Abū Ḥayyān, *sub* Q 6:1).

The Qur’ān always uses the noun *al-zulma* in its plural form, either as indefinite (*zulumāt*) or definite (*al-zulumāt*). The active participle of the fourth verbal form, *azlama-yuzlimu-izlaman*, meaning “to become or to make dark”, appears once in the singular accusative form (*min al-layli muzliman*) (Q 10:27) and once in the indefinite masculine plural form (*fa-idhā hum*

*muzlimūna*) (Q 36:37). Exegetical reflections underscore the rhetoric subtlety in the usage of the two antonyms—light and darkness—which are presented in stark contrasts to each other eleven times where darkness always appearing in the plural and light without exception in the singular, either as indefinite *nūrun* (e.g., Q 24:35), definite *al-nūr* (e.g. Q 14:1; 35:20), or with the possessive suffixes such as *nūrahu* (Q 9:32), and *min nūrikum* (e.g., Q 57:13). The plural usage of darkness is because of the multiplicity of the causes (*li-kathrat asbābihā*) which produce darkness, as well as because it is carried by countless bodies, and thus, in its metaphorical usage as misguidance (*al-dalāl*), the plural usage reflects many aspects (*muta‘addid*) of misguidance. Light, on the other hand, stands for guidance (*al-hudā*) and guidance is always singular (Bayḍawī, *sub* Q 6:1). Muḥammad b. ‘Umar Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (543-606/1148-1209) says, “the reasons for the metaphorical usage of darkness for disbelief and of light for belief are self-evident: Truth is one and falsehood [has] multiple [aspects]. For the one who takes them as perceptible sensory states (*al-kayfiyyat al-mahsūsa*), the rationale for this usage is that light is a perfect and strong quality; it slowly accepts decreases (*taqbalu-l-tanāquṣ qalīlan qalīlan*) while there are numerous gradations [of darkness]; for this reason, darkness is used in the plural” (Rāzī, *sub* Q 6:1).

The twentieth century exegete Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (1865-1935) points out several other aspects of this usage:

The wisdom behind mentioning light in the singular and darkness in the plural is that light is one single entity (*shay’un wāḥid*), even though its sources may be different and it may be strong or weak, whereas darkness is the veiling of the light by bodies which do not have their own lights (*ghayr al-nayyira*), and these are numerous. Likewise, spiritual light (*al-nūr al-ma‘nawī*) is one single entity in all its forms, manifestations, and particulars.

Both kinds of light can encounter numerous manifestations of darkness. Truth is one and does not increase in forms (*lā yata‘addad*), while its opposite, falsehood, is multiple. Guidance is one and misguidance that confronts it, is of numerous kinds—an example of this is the Oneness of Allah (*taḥwīdu-Ilāhī*), opposing which are *al-ta‘ṭīl* (a theological concept that denies all Attributes of Allah), various forms of association (*shirk*) with the ontological Oneness of