

# Al-A'rāf.

Mustafeez Ahmad 'Alavi\*

Al-A'rāf used in Sura al-A'rāf is plural of 'arf or 'urf -- meaning height, top, tower and peak.

When it is derived from 'Urf it means to be recognized, to be known and to be introduced.

It also means tradition, convention and recognized virtue.

'Arf means prominent, distinguished and popular -- also used as 'arīf -- meaning representative figure of a group or a tribe.

Sura al-A'rāf in the verses, where it relates the life in paradise and life in the hell, reveals that there is a wall or veil between the hell and the heaven for the demarcation of their circumferences. The top of this wall is called a'rāf, which means heights.

These heights are inhabited by some people having the facility to observe the companions in paradise and those who are in the hell.

"The companions of the Garden will call out to the companions of the Fire, "We have indeed found the promises of our Lord to us true. Have you also found your Lord's promises true? "The shall say "yes"! But a crier shall proclaim between them "The curse of Allah is on the wrong doers! Those who would hinder (men) from the path of Allah, and would seek in it something crooked; they were those who denied Hereafter.

Between them shall be a veil, and on the heights will be men who would know every one by his marks. They will call out to the companions of the Garden, "Peace on you".

They will not have entered, but they will have an assurance (thereof).

When their eyes shall be turned towards the companions of the Fire, they will say "Our Lord! send us not to the company of the wrong doers."

The men on Heights will call to certain men whom they will know from their marks saying, "Of what profit to you, were your hoards and your arrogant ways? Behold! are these not the men whom you swore that Allah with his Mercy would never bless?"

Enter ye the Garden; no fear shall be on you, nor shall ye grieve."<sup>1</sup>

The veil mentioned in these verses is also described in Sura Al-Hadeed - (13) as Sūr meaning wall.

\*Research Officer, Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre, University of the Punjab.

1. al-Qur'ān, al-A'rāf / 44-49. (Translation by 'Abd Allah Yusuf Ali, Sh. Muhammad Ashraf Aibak Road, Lahore-1990)

"One day will the Hypocrites men and women say to the believers ; "wait for us ! let us borrow (a light) from your light." It will be said, "Turn ye back to your rear ! then seek a light (where ye can)" So a wall will be put up between them, with a gate therein. Within it will be Mercy, throughout; and without it all alongside will be (wrath and) Punishment !"

Now, the question does arise ; What is *A'rāf*? who are the people on these heights? What is their next home (if any)?

The interpretations of the Holy Qur'ān are replete with differences, because the word *a'rāf* has different connotations.

"One schools thinks that the men on the heights are angels, or such men of exalted spiritual dignity (e.g. the great apostles) as will be able to know the souls at sight as regards their spiritual worth : The heights will be exalted stations from which they will welcome the righteous with a salutation of peace, even before the righteous have entered heaven; the salvation to those whom they solute.

Another school of thought thinks that the men on the heights are such souls as are not decidedly on the side of merit or decidedly on the side of sin, but evenly balanced on a partition between Heaven and hell. Their case is yet to be decided, but their salutation to the righteous is a wistful salutation, because they hope for God's mercy.

The third line of interpretation is close to the first one, with this exception that the partition and heights are figurative. The higher souls will rejoice at the approaching salvation of the righteous." 2

We will deal with the three questions one by one respectively. First question is : What is *A'rāf*?

Etymologically *a'rāf* is plural of *'arf* meaning height and top. It is used for everything exalted.

According to the interpretation of Raghīb Iṣfahānī and Jubran Mas'ood, it is referred to the wall between the Hell and the Heaven.<sup>3</sup>

Ibn Manẓoor maintains that *a'rāf* is plural of *'urf* meaning top and elevated surface - especially top of the wall between the Garden and the Fire.<sup>4</sup>

Urdu Encyclopaedia of Islam quotes R. Bell pronouncing *a'rāf* as *ī'rāf* meaning (the people able) to recognize. He translates the verse as, "Some people are to identify (as super:visors or guards) and they identity."<sup>5</sup>

2. 'Abd Allah Yusuf 'Ali; Translation and Commentary on Qur'ān (Amana Corp. USA) 352.

3. *Mufradāt al-Qur'ān* (tr. Muhammad 'Abduh, Sh. Shams al-Haq Lahore - 1987) 2/690.

*Al-Ra'id* (Dar al-'Ilm Lilmaalāyīn, Beirut - 5th Edition - 1986) 1/170.

4. *Lisān al-'Arab* (Dar al-Turath al-'Arabi 1st Edition Beirut - 1988) 9/156

5. University of the Punjab, Lahore - 1980. 2/879.

Ashraf Ali Thanwi opines that there would be an interception (wall) the top of which is a 'rāf, from where the paradise and the hell are seen clearly.<sup>6</sup>

Abu al-Kalām Azād writes, "If two places are adjoining, and to be segregated, a wall is built between them, so is the demarcation between heaven and hell. If one step is forward it is paradise, and if one step is lost it is hell."<sup>7</sup>

Ameen Aḥsan Iṣlahi interprets, "A'rāf is a plural of 'arf, meaning the upper part of forehead of a horse or a cockscomb. That is why this word is used for tower, turret, and a seeing-sight, built on a high wall or on the top of a hill."<sup>8</sup>

A'rāf is also derived from 'Arf, which is used in the meaning of fragrance, sweet smell and perfume. 'Urf is terminologically used for custom, usage, practice and convention or tradition.<sup>9</sup>

Mufti Muhammad Shafi' has nicely explained a'rāf, going in details of meaning of this word and their implications or connotations. Muhammad Idrīs Kandhalwi also agrees with him in this connection.<sup>10</sup>

The essence of their arguments is that in the *ayāt-al-a'rāf* the fortification is mentioned which would exist between dwellers of paradise and dwellers of hell. This is also mentioned in Sura Al-Hadīd as *Sūr*.

The word *Sūr* is used for the wide city-wall, which has been built on solid and established grounds, and have entrenchments to defend the city remaining aware of the invaders. The top of this fortification is named as a'rāf, because it is plural of 'arf which means prominent and distinguished or an elevated surface.

The word *hijāb* (veil) means something obstructing the mixing of two. It also means interception, prohibiting entrance into something. It figuratively means the veil serving as demarcation of circumferences of paradise and hell but literally it stands for a wall prohibiting two communities to mingle with each other. It may be a glass permitting eyes to have a glance at the on-going scenario, and also a wall prohibiting mixing. The top of this wall is called a'raf<sup>11</sup>

The second question is : Who are *Ashāb al-A'rāf*? To whom a'rāf is going to be allotted on the Day of Judgment.

The Holy Qur'ān declares that they are *rijāl* (men) having the ability to recognize dwellers of hell and those of the heaven by their marks.

6. *Bayan al-Qur'ān* (Sa'eed and company, Karachi) 1/4 - 16.

7. *Tarjuman al-Qur'ān* (Islamic Academy Lahore - 1976) 2/11

8. *Tadabbur-e-Qur'ān* (Faran Academy, Lahore - 1988) 3/266.

9. Dr. Rohi Ba'al baki, *Al-Mawrid* (Beirut - 1991) 758.

10. Ma'ārif al-Qur'an (al-Ma'ārif Karachi - 1992) 3/567.

11. *Ma'ārif al-Qur'ān* (Maktaba Uthmania Lahore - 1982) 3/50.

11. Fakhr al-Razi, *Tafsīr al-Kabir* (al - Matba'a al-Bahiya al-Misriyah-1938) 13, 14/87

Ibn Kathīr has discussed in detail the men on a'raf. According to him the different opinions of the different interpreters are converged to one point, which is the stance that the men having equal repository of good and bad deeds, would be awarded the status of a'raf. When asked about the persons having evenly balanced sheet of their virtues and vices, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) answered that they would be settled on a'raf. They would not be allowed to enter paradise, however, have some assurance.

Keeping in view, the traditions mentioned by Ibn Jarīr Ṭabri, regarding *aṣḥāb al-a'raf*, we come to know that they are the people having balanced quantity of virtues and vices. They have neither so many good deeds that they may be awarded paradise, nor do they have so many evils that they may have been moved towards the Fire.

Ashraf 'Ali Thanwi, Syed Quṭab Shaheed and Syed Abu al-A'la Maududi are of the same view.<sup>13</sup>

Al-Qurṭabi has referred to as many as ten traditions regarding their different categories derived from the holy words of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). These include, the people having equal quantity of good and bad deeds, the pious scholars, the martyrs, the martyrs who have fought without the consent of their parents, the messengers of God, the angels and the illegitimate off-spring of human being.<sup>14</sup>

Ameen Aḥsan Iṣlahi has raised some objections about these categories. According to him the word *rijāl* means important personalities. He opines that only the Muslim scholars, who are struggling for the projection of virtue and goodness, deserve the elevated and exalted status of a'raf.<sup>15</sup>

The answer to the third question is unanimously propounded that *aṣḥāb al a'raf* are to be awarded paradise later. Because the Holy Qur'ān assures that though they have not entered paradise, "They will have an assurance (thereof)". Again their salutation to the paradise owners is a sign that they will join them in the long run. They would be provided with the facility to observe paradise and hell, greeting the paradise winners and criticizing the hell choosers. After the decision of all the mankind they will be ordered to enter the Garden.

Keeping in view the precious opinion of Fakhr al-Rāzi<sup>16</sup> we come to the conclusion that there are two versions about a'raf; firstly there are heights between paradise and hell, inhabited by some distinguished persons. Secondly, there is an exalted stage from

12. *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (tr. Muhammad Memon : Nōor Muhammad Kutab Khana, Karachi) 2/168, 69.

13. *Jāmi al-Bayān* (Maktaba Mustafa al-Babi-Egypt-1968) 7,8/186, 87. *Bayān-al-Qur'ān*, Ibid.

*Fi Zilāl al-Qur'ān* (Dar al-Shurūq, Beirut - 1980) 3/1293.

*Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* (Idara Tarjumān al-Qur'an, Lahore - 1990) 2/33.

14. *Jami' al-Aḥkam al-Qur'ān* (Cairo - 1967) 7/211 - 13.

15. *Tadabbur-e-Qur'ān*, Ibid.

16. *al-Rāzi*, Ibid.

which the recognition of the paradise winners and hell choosers will be managed by one who will have equal storage of virtues and vices.

About *aṣḥāb al-a'rāf*, one school of thought claims, that they are those who belong to the high rank of the dignified persons, may be the messengers of God, the angels, the martyrs and the Muslim scholars. While the other group declares that they are the people belonging to the second rank of dignified persons, having equal account of virtue and vice. They may be the martyrs, who fought without the consent of their parents, the believers from Jinnāt, and illegitimate off spring of human being.

Both the groups of *aṣḥāb al-a'rāf* would be granted paradise according to their respective ranks. The Omniscient knows better.