Quran 3:7:

He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book: in it are verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning); they are the foundation of the Book: others are allegorical. But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part there of that is allegorical, seeking discord, and searching for its hidden meanings, but no one knows its hidden meanings except Allah and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: “We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord”; and none will grasp the Message except men of understanding. (Abdullah Yusuf Ali translation)

Under the commentary of this verse, Abdullah Yusuf Ali writes,

This passage gives us an important clue to the interpretation of the Holy Quran. Broadly speaking it may be divided into two portions, not given separately, but intermingled: viz.

the nucleus or foundation of the Book, literally “the mother of the Book”.
the part which is figurative, metaphorical, or allegorical.
It is very fascinating to take up the latter, and exercise our ingenuity about its meaning, but it refers to such profound matters that are beyond human language and though people of wisdom may get some light from it, no
one should be dogmatic, as the final meaning is known to Allah alone. The Commentators usually understand the verses “of established meaning” (muhkam) to refer to the categorical orders of the Shariah (or the Law), which are plain to everyone’s understanding. But perhaps the meaning is wider: the “mother of the Book” must include the very foundation on which all Law rests, the essence of Allah’s Message, as distinguished from the various illustrative parables, allegories, and ordinances. If we refer to xi. 1 and xxxix. 23, we shall find that in a sense the whole of the Quran has both “established meaning” and allegorical meaning. The division is not between the verses, but between the meanings to be attached to them. Each verse is but a sign or symbol: what it represents is something immediately applicable, and something internal and independent of time and space, -the “Forms of Ideas” in Plato’s Philosophy. The wise man will understand that there is an “essence” and an illustrative clothing given to the essence, throughout the Book. We must try to understand it as best we can, but not waste our energies in disputing about matters beyond our depth.

“Nursi defines mutashābih as follows: The styles of the Qur’an, called mutashābih (ambiguous verses), put the forms before the people’s eyes like telescopes or powerful spectacles. Most of the masters of eloquence use figures of speech (al-istiʻāra) in order to illustrate subtle meanings or depict different views. Therefore, mutashābih verses are figures of speech of an abstruse kind because they depict subtle truths. In other words, because of the intellectual capacity of the ordinary people, the Qur’an depicts the subtle truths in allegorical form (mutashābihāt), with metaphors (istiʻāra) and similes (tashbīh). For example, regarding the use of Merciful (al-Rahmān) and Compassionate (al-Rahīm) in reference to God, Nursi underlines that both attributes are ambiguous forms (mutashābihāt), like God having a “Hand”. This style is a divine condescension to human minds, and it makes something familiar to the mind and causes the subtle truths to be understood. This style is like one’s speech to a child, in terms that he is familiar with. The ordinary people gather their information through their senses, and they can only understand subtle truths in the mirror of what they envisage them to be.” (Modern Interpretaton of the Quran, under the category ‘clear and ambigious verses’) For a more in depth understanding of ‘allegories in the Quran’, see the post:
Symbolism and Allegory in the Quran

Commenting on the above mentioned verse, Yahiya Emerick writes:

“The Prophet once said, “When you see people busy trying to interpret the mutashabihat verses, stay away from them, for they are the people God talked about (in the Qur’an).” (Bukhari)

Does this mean that we can never speculate on their meanings? No, and many companions and later scholars cautiously looked into the possible meaning of such verses.” (The Holy Quran in Today’s English, note 268)

“In addition, there are other verses in the Qur’an that clearly state that insightful believers (in other words well-schooled scholars) can understand the meaning of the Qur’an’s verses. (See 54:17 and 11:1 for example.)” (Ibid, note 269)

Abdullah Yusuf Ali writes,

“One reading, rejected by the majority of Commentators, but accepted by Mujahid and others, would not make a break at the point here marked Waq Lazim, but would run the two sentences together. In that case the construction would run:

“No one knows its hidden meanings except Allah and those who are firm in knowledge. They say”, etc.”

Under the commentary of Surah 5 verse 101 (O ye who believe! Ask not Questions about things which, if made plain to you, May cause you trouble. But of ye ask about things when the Quran is being revealed, they will be made plain to you, God will forgive those: For God is oft-forgiving, Most forbearing.)

Abdullah Yusuf Ali writes (Note 807):

“Many secrets are wisely hidden from us. If the future were known to us, we need not necessarily be happy. In many cases we should be miserable. If the inner meaning of some of
the things we see before our eyes were disclosed to us, it might cause a lot of mischief. God’s message, in so far as it is necessary for shaping our conduct is plain and open to us. But there are many things too deep for us to understand, either individually or collectively. It would be foolish to pry into them, as some foolish people tried to do in the time of the Apostle. Where a matter is mentioned in the Quran, we can reverently ask for its meaning. That is not forbidden. But we should never pass the bounds of (1) our own capacity to understand (2) the time and occasion when we ask questions, and (3) the part of the Universal Plan which it is God’s purpose to reveal to us.” (The Holy Quran: Text, Translation and Commentary pg. 274)

In support of this ruling I cite a hadith and its interpretation by a renowned scholar:

The following excerpt is taken from “Maariful Hadith” by Maulana Manzoor Nomaani Volume 1 pg. 241-242:

‘It is related by Abu Zarr Ghifari (may Allah be pleased with him) that the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said: “I see the things of the invisible world you do not see and hear the sounds [of the invisible world] you do not hear. The sky is shaking and it is appropriate that it shakes. By the Glorious One in whose power is my life! There is not even a space of four fingers in the heavens where an angel is not prostrating himself before the Almighty, with his forehead touching the ground. If you knew the things that are known to me, you would laugh little and weep much, and could not enjoy the bed with your spouses, and would go out into forests and deserts groaning and crying out to the Lord”. [After relating it] Abu Zarr said to us: “I wish I were a tree that was cut down”. (Musnad Ahmad, Tirmidhi and ibn i Majah)

Commenting on this hadith, Nomaani writes:

“Since man has been created to function as the Vicegerent of Allah on earth and he can discharge his duty properly only when he enjoys peace of mind in the world, the truth have not been revealed to him which would have ruined his composure and tranquility. For example, if the punishment of the grave and Hell was made known to us and we could see all the events of the Hereafter with our own eyes, we could not attend to the daily needs or even manage to live. But as the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was raised up for the fulfillment of a special mission, it was essential that these realities were revealed to him to a certain extent so that he could attain the certitude and assurance that was needed for his lofty work and
position. Thus, certain truth beyond the sphere of human experience were made known to him, and, with it, Divine Providence ordained for his heart an extraordinary strength that enabled him to carry out the tremendous responsibilities of Messengership in a fitting manner and lead a balanced life that could serve as a model to mankind at all times.”

The following excerpt is taken from “Science in the Quran” by Sayyid Rami Al Rifai chapter 1:

“It is clear from the prophet Muhammad’s (saws) own words that He (saws) understood there is knowledge in everything which needs to be studied and discovered before it can be known, today for mankind science fulfils this role. The Prophet – praise and peace be upon him – said, “Indeed, knowledge has a branch which resembles a hidden thing (it needs to be discovered); no one grasps it except those who know Allah.” Allah in the Quran speaks about all aspects of creation, but much of it was beyond the understanding of the desert Arabs living 1400 years ago, Allah says: “And we strike these similitudes for the people, but none understands them except those who know.” (29: 42). Regarding this the prophet (saws) said, “Indeed, there is an external meaning and an internal meaning to the Qur’an, a scope and a point.” Ali, pointing to his breast, said, “Indeed, herein lies abundant knowledge; would that there were some to (comprehend and) transmit it.” It was because not every person was capable of understanding science that the prophet (saws) said, “We prophets were ordered to communicate with everyone according to his ability to understand.” This is because there was a danger in trying to teach people science they would not be able to prove for another 1400 years, so the prophet (saws) warned, “No one has ever recited a prophetic quotation to a people which their minds have failed to grasp without it being a temptation for them.” The prophet taught the scientific meanings behind specific verses to the companions who could grasp them and they understood the dangers of trying to teach knowledge that could not be visually proven. Allah said in the Quran, “It is Allah who has created the seven heavens and of (the) earth, their like (meaning the other planets); and between them the Command descends (the Laws of Physics governing space)” (65: 12). Ibn Abbas (r.a) said about this verse, “Were I to relate its interpretation you would stone me” or “you would have said, ‘He is an unbeliever’”. Abu Hurrah similarly said, “I have received from the Prophet of Allah two things (types of knowledge), one of which I have made public. Were I to divulge the other, this throat would be cut.” The prophet (saws) said, “Abu-Bakr has excelled you not by excessive fasting and much prayer, but by a secret which rests in his chest.” His ability to understand science and everything the prophet (saws) taught him about the universe and
Allah. Allah said in the Quran “Say (unto them, O Muhammad): Are those who know equal with those who know not? But only men of understanding will pay heed.” (39: 9)

Usaama al-Azami writes:

“My own suggestion to Muslims grappling with such an issue is to recognize that when it comes to what we believe, science and religion address two kinds of truth: empirical and revealed. Empirical (observation-based) truth is the stuff of science. It’s contingent on our sense perception, and humanity’s current state of knowledge. It’s truth with a lower-case t. It’s relative to what the human senses can access at a given point in time, and makes no claims to being absolute. This is not to belittle it, as most empirical truths are what we consider facts, like the fact that the spherical earth goes around the sun.

Revealed truth, by contrast, is based upon revelation which, if you believe it, is Truth with a capital T. For the believer, it is absolute, not relative. Our knowledge of empirical truth can and has improved over time; just as the once held ‘fact’ that the sun goes around the earth has been corrected with the passage of time. No reasonable person believes this ‘fact’ today; though the ancients may have been justified in thinking it was genuinely scientific. Revealed truth, on the other hand, claims to be constant, absolute, and unchangeable. Problems of this kind are nothing new for Muslim theologians. An example is the statement of the Prophet that: after the sun sets, it goes to the Throne of God and prostrates, before rising again from the East. This statement is recorded in multiple collections of Prophetic statements including the respected Sunni collections of Bukhari and Muslim. Muslims additionally believe that such statements from the Prophet constitute revealed truth. The reality is that virtually no Muslim theologian has ever taken such revealed truths to be statements of empirical truth. In such an instance, a Muslim will believe in the revealed truth, but not think this means that the empirical truth is wrong. Rather, the two kinds of truth address different domains, the moral and the empirical (what is observable through the senses). The first addresses what Muslims should believe as a matter of faith, and how they should behave; and the other is whatever a reasonable person believes about the observable world based on the current state of human knowledge.”

The picture is made clear now. Concealing the reality behind the mutoshabihat (allegorical) verses is to protect human beings from falling into hardship and complexity. By believing in the allegorical verses, we automatically suffice the condition of knowing the larger picture that the allegory is trying to hide. Thus the religion is completed as even a commoner can
now understand the Quran.’

(This day those who disbelieve have despaired of [defeating] your religion; so fear them not, but fear Me. This day I have perfected for you your religion and completed My favor upon you and have approved for you Islam as religion.) [Quran 5:3]

A practical example of this concept can be seen in the history of the Israelites. According to Deuteronomy 18: 15-19:

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. 16 This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: “If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.” 17 Then the Lord replied to me: “They are right in what they have said. 18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet who shall speak to them everything that I command. 19 Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. 20

‘According to the Muslims, this prophecy after Jesus (peace be upon him) applies to none other than the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) who was sent to complete the religion of Allah (God). And so, to believe in him and follow the guidance revealed to him is a binding obligation on every human being.’

References:


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