?What does Jahiliyah mean

In the Name of Allah, The Most Gracious, The Most Merciful

"Is it (then that) the judgement of (the time of pagan) ignorance they desire? And who (else) can be better than Allah to judge for a people of assured faith." Holy Qur'an (5:50)

"Judgement is of two kinds -the judgement of Allah- the Great and Almighty - and the judgement of the people of the ignorance (jahiliyah). So, whoever misses Allah's judgement, surely will judge according to the judgement of the people of jahiliyah." Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (.(a.s

What does Jahiliyah mean?

1. Islam calls the pagan life of Arabs `Jahiliyah' (ignorance). This label specifically identified the lifestyle to be found in the land of the Arabs before the Islamic Mission began. It included the beliefs and customs of the pagan Arabs who lived in a most decadent and perverse manner. This stage in history was full of chaos and corruption, and witnessed a decline in the sociology and ideology of the age. This was because the signs of truth had disappeared in that dark historical stage.

The aspects of deviation from truth and justice had become embodied in the society, much in the same manner as the perverse practices of Sodom and Gommorah in the time of Prophet Lot, so that evil was acknowledged as good and good was acknowledged as evil.

2. Islam calls this lifestyle of the Arabs desert dwellers, `Jahiliyah', to identify the ideological and social nature of that age and to compare it to general `jahiliyah' of nations and peoples that have arisen during man's evolution. Therefore, where we have written `jahiliyah' with a capital "J" we mean specifically the Age of Ignorance of the Arabs in the pre-Islamic age, and when it is specified with a "j" it refers to global ignorance at any stage in man's evolution where ignorance has buried truth, as is found in our social and ideological values today.

3. Islam calls that miserable historical period of Arab lifestyle `Jahiliyah' because it is a word which represents ignorant beliefs, practices, rules, laws, customs, values and behavior of a perverse society.

4. Islam does not call the Arabs, `Jahiliyah', before the emergence of its blessed mission because of academic ignorance, nor does it call them ignorant `jahilin' because of illiteracy nor for backwardness in the areas of sciences, so we understand that `Jahiliyah' had a specific and

special meaning.

5. Islam called the Arabs of that age `jahiliyah' because even in the presence of academic and artistic knowledge, the social manner and behavior of the people and its acceptable lifestyle were such that the word, `Jahiliyah', is suitable for them. The Holy Qur'an has told us about other nations with capabilities in science, engineering, and skills. Still, it regarded them as `jahiliyah' (ignorant).

6. The Qur'an describes nature as equal among nations of `jahiliyah'. In the Qur'anic viewpoint, all of these nations were ignorant. We are able to understand this equality clearly through the comparison which the Qur'an has made between the backward state of Arabs and the developed state of nations before them.

7. Allah, the Exalted, says:

"What! have they not travelled in the earth and seen how was the end of those before them? They were more (in number) than those and mightier in strength, and greater are the relics (of their power) in the earth, but availed them not what they were earning. And when came unto them their apostles with clear proofs (of their truthfulness), exalted they in what they had with them of knowledge, but encompassed them that which they were wont to scoff." Holy Qur'an (40:82-83)

"Have they travelled not in the earth and seen how was the end of those before them? They were stronger than them in strength; and they dug up the earth and built on it more than what these did build; and there came unto them their apostles with clear proofs (miracles); (for) it is not Allah Who should do them (any) injustice, but they did injustice to their own selves. Then evil was the end of those who wrought evil, for belied they the signs of Allah, and at them they used to mock." Holy Qur'an (30:9-10)

"And how many of the generations We did destroy before them, they were (even) better in riches and in splendor. Say you (O Our Apostle Muhammad) As to those who are in error, the Beneficent (Allah) will certainly lengthen the span (of their) life; until they behold what they were promised, be it the chastisement (in this world) or the Hour (of Doom); Then shall they know who is worse placed and (who is the) weakest in forces!" Holy Qur'an (19:74-75)

In this manner, the Qur'an has revealed the depth and content of those nations to stress that scientific development of man and his civil advancement are not able to save him from the claws of deviation and take him out of the fangs of ignorance as long as he embellishes ignorant faith and embodies the same abnormal ignorant behavior of the general society. Although these ignorant deviated nations are scattered throughout history and are different in scientific and civil levels, they share common factors. One mental state combines them

together and unifies their deviated course. Allah, the Exalted, says: "And those (pagans) who have no knowledge say: `Why does not Allah speak to us or a sign come to us?' Even thus said those before them, the like of what they say; their hearts are alike; We have indeed made clear the signs to people who are certainly sure." Holy Qur'an (2:118)

This similarity among the hearts of the deviated nations and peoples and the unity of the mental trend, which the Qur'an has revealed, is the common line which identifies all aspects of the pre-Islamic period of ignorance and is the center from which all activities of the ignorant man begins.

This similarity is the factor forming the identity and personality of this pre-Islamic nation. Also this description may be applied to all stages of human history whose generations have evolved into a devious and deviated system and refused to follow the straight path of truth and peace- the straight path of Allah, the law of the Lord, and the message of salvation.

When we examine Islamic texts and phrases about identifying and describing the life of (pre-Islamic period) ignorance, we are able to understand the meaning of the idiom `Jahiliyah' and the reason why the Qur'an has used it. Also we are able to understand why the same idiom has been applied to other nations throughout history.

We are able to understand this terminology and labelling once we learns of the ignorance in the history of past nations and its connected parts, when we follow the unity of the line and trends which associated `ahiliyah' through its effects and remains, and when we study the description of the Qur'an about the most important aspects of `Jahiliyah", its ways of thinking, and its psychological and behavioral trends.

When we reach this awareness, we find that `jahiliyah' means error, going astray, deviation from Allah's straight path, and negligence in His worship. That is because `jahiliyah', in the Qur'anic viewpoint, means a religion and lifestyle that follows a line contrary to the line of Islam in nature and aim. It follows the line of deviation from the path of true religon and Allah's `shari'ah' (law) which guides man.

`Jahiliyah' (ignorance) is a way of life. It has its own faith, way of thinking, and lifestyle including social manners, worship, values and concepts, viewpoint towards life, method to create civilization, and a direction for human activities in areas such as culture, art, literature, politics, economy, power, law and order, etc.

8. In order to unveil the ugly face of `jahiliyah' and discover the thread that entwines current ignorant international thoughts, it is better to return to the Holy Qur'an which describes `Jahiliyah', and its people, and the dimensions of their lifestyle and the features of their civilization and social system. Also it denotes their general framework and the basic rules of

their formation. The Qur'an says:

"And none but the guilty led us astray." Holy Qur'an (26:99)

"And indeed they have led many astray, and nothing increases to the wrongdoers except perdition." Holy Qur'an (71:24) "But if they answer you not, know that they only follow their low desires. And who is more erring than he who follows his low desires without any guidance from Allah? Surely Allah guides not the wrongdoing people." Holy Qur'an (28:50)

"But they rejected him, so We delivered him and those with him in the ark,..." Holy Qur'an (10:73)

"Then, after him We sent messengers to their people. They came to them with clear arguments, but they would not believe what they had rejected before. Thus do We seal the hearts of those who exceed the limits." Holy Qur'an (10:74)

"Then after them We sent Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh and his chiefs with Our signs, but they were arrogant, and they were a guilty people." Holy Qur'an (10:75) "But, on account of the fear of Pharaoh and their chiefs persecuting them, none believed in Moses except a few of his people. And Pharaoh was truly high-handed in the land; and surely he was extravagant." Holy Qur'an (10:83)

"They said: O Hud, you have brought us no clear argument, and we are not going to desert our gods for your word, and we are not believers in you." Holy Qur'an (11:53)

"Say: O people, if you are in doubt as to my religion, (know that) I serve not those whom you serve besides Allah,..." Holy Qur'an (10:104)

"And when he holds authority, he makes effort in the land to cause mischief in it and destroy tilth and offspring; and Allah loves not mischief." Holy Qur'an (2:205)

"The life of this world is made to seem fair to those who disbelieve, and they mock those who believe..." Holy Qur'an (2:212)

"And they say: Our Lord, we only obeyed our leaders and our great men, so they led us astray from the (right) path." Holy Qur'an (33:67)

9. If we want more clarity about this collapsed civil situation, let's consider carefully the sermons of Imam Ali (a.s.) from Nahjul- Balagha, in which he explains the formation of `Jahiliyah' and analyses the form of its life and faith as follows: "Allah sent Muhammad (s.a.w.) as a warner (against vice) for all the worlds and a trustee of His revelation, while you people of Arabia were following the worst religion and you resided among rough stones and venomous serpents. You drank dirty water and ate filthy food. You shed blood of each other and cared not for relationship. Idols are fixed among you and sins are clinging to you."

Then, he (a.s.) speaks about the situations and conditions that preceded the Holy Prophetic

mission as follows: "At that time people had fallen into vices whereby the rope of religion had been broken, the pillars of belief had been shaken, principles had been sacrileged, the system had become topsy turvy, openings were narrow, passages were dark, guidance was unknown and darkness prevailed.

Allah, The Most Beneficent, was being disobeyed. Satan was given support and belief had been foresaken. As a result, the pillars of religion fell down, its traces could not be discerned, its passages had been destroyed and its streets had fallen into decay. People obeyed Satan and tread his paths. They sought water from his watering places. Through them Satan's emblems were flying and his standard was raised in vices which trampled the people under their hoofs, and treaded upon them with their feet.

The vices stood on their toes (in full stature) and the people immersed in them were astrayed, perplexed, ignorant and seduced as though in a good house with bad neighbors. Instead of sleep they had wakefulness and for antimony they had tears in the eyes. They were in a land where the learned were bridled (mouths forced shut) while the ignorant were honored."( )

In another place, he (a.s.) says:

"Allah sent the Prophet at a time when the people were going astray in perplexity and were moving here and there in mischief. Desires had deflected them and self-conceit had swerved them. Extreme ignorance had made them foolish. They were confounded by the unsteadiness of matters and the evils of ignorance. Then the Prophet (s.a.w.) did his best in giving them sincere advice, himself trodding on the right path and called (them) towards wisdom and good counsel."( )

"I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and His Messenger whom He deputized when the people were collecting in the abyss and moving in bewilderment. The reins of destruction were dragging them and the locks of malice lay fixed on their hearts." In another place of his sermons and sayings, we read another analysis of the nature of the ignorant man and his moral and psychological character. Imam Ali (a.s.) sheds bright light on the nature of this man in each period and stage and makes these sick symptoms as distinguishing qualities for the ignorant man and society.

Imam Ali (a.s.) speaks about evil, deviation and the call of Satan. He (a.s.) denotes that the followers of this call are ignorant:

"And the followers of fanaticism, the brothers of fanaticism and the horsemen of haughtiness and ignorance proved him (Prophet Muhammad, (s.a.w.)) to be true."

In another speech concerning `Jahiliyah', we read another analysis of this restless social situation and discover another dimension in its structure. He (a.s.) says:

"The conditions were full of distress. The hands were scattered. The majority was divided. They were in great anguish and under layers of ignorance. They buried their daughters alive, worshipped idols, disregarded kinship and practised robbery."( ) Imam Ali (a.s.) is not statisfied with speaking about `Jahiliyah', analysing its structure, and discovering the meanings of civilization and life therein. Rather, he warns people against the bad background of those ignorant thoughts. He says:

"Do not be like those rude people of `Jahiliyah' who did not exert themselves in religion nor use their intellects in the matter of Allah. They are like the breaking of eggs in the nest of a dangerous bird, because their breaking looks bad but keeping them intact would mean production of dangerous young ones."

Through contemplating deeply on these Islamic analyses and texts-the verses and sermons-and analysing their ideas, one will know the features of `Jahiliyah' society, recognize the clearest characteristics of the life in it, and know the most common elements among the various `jahiliyah' nations.

These texts altogether denote that the society of `jahiliyah' is deviated from what is right; it does not follow the teachings of religion, nor it seeks light from its system, nor it conforms to the principles of its law. Besides, they (the texts and verses) focus on the aspects and the common features among the international beliefs in the attitude towards the Divine Messages, in behavior, and the psychological situation of these ignorant beliefs.

These ignorant beliefs refuse and doubt the messages of Prophets, and insist on disbelief, going astray, and following low desires.

The definite result of this rejection is that the refusing person has followed a material, animalistic direction. Thus, lust overcomes him, pleasures lead him, because he has broken off his relation with Allah. So he has inclined to the earth, deified the volatile world of lust, and worshipped the turns of the self. It is natural that this material and ignorant life is full of corruption, crimes, and vanity.

We have read that the Qur'an describes these ignorant thoughts and noted their diseases and corrupt aspects. The Qur'an has shown the most prominent, sick aspects of those ignorant thoughts as: oppression, crime, haughtiness, extravagance, arrogance, deviation, doubt, corruption and destruction on earth, bloodshedding, sneering at truth, blindly following the leaders of deviation and corruption, and following lusts and low desires.

After this Qur'anic discussion, we have read that Imam Ali (a.s.) has analyzed the most prominent aspects of `Jahiliyah'life. He (a.s.) has stressed those aspects which the Qur'an has stressed such as: decline, degradation, behavioral and ideological fall. He (a.s.) refers to

bloodshedding, disbelieving in Allah, refusing the messages of the Prophets, ignorance in religion, shaky pillars of religion, going astray, bewilderment, haughtiness, spite, fanaticism, victory of lust and low desires, and so on.

With this Islamic analysis which we have read in the Qur'anic texts and Imam Ali's sermons, we are able to know that the pre-Islamic society is the one which refuses to believe in Allah and deviates in its behavior and life system from Allah's right path, irrespective of being an ignorant society like the Bedouins and pastorals or being a society which lives in the age of the atom, computer, space travel, etc.

`Jahiliyah' is a civil situation having behavioral, psychological, and physical elements. It has no relation to the degree of science and knowledge existing in the society. It is just as Imam Ali (a.s.) says:

"The worst religion, and the worst house."

Whenever this mark of evil and corruption, is found in faith, the social system and the method of life, then we are able to call the person who lives in its shade as ignorant `jahili', and we are able to describe the human life following it as `jahiliyah'. For this reason, the Holy Qur'an calls the deviated person, `dhal' (one who has gone astray), and those who deviate `dhaloon'. `Dhal' is the person who does not know the way and blunders far away from the truth and guidance whether in his thinking and faith or in his worship, life system, and way of his dealings.

Describing the ignorant life and society, Imam Ali (a.s.) has often used the word `hayara' (bewildered) in his sermons. That is because bewilderment, worry, estrangement, uneasiness, etc., are the most prominent morbid symptoms from which the ignorant person suffers. All these diseases hit him because he is deviated from Allah's path and His law.

Thus estrangement, bewilderment, going astray, and uneasiness are the distinguishing and essential marks of the ignorant society which is full of vanity, oppression, corruption, and low desires.

Islam has shown that the ignorant person is deviated, lost, bewildered and restless, for such a person suffers from mental disorders. This condition has an influence on all aspects of his life. So, man finds himself standing before two ways in every period or age. These two ways are: 1) The way of guidance and belief; and, 2) The way of ignorance and misguidance.

The Qur'an highlights this in the following verse:

"Is it then the judgment of ignorance that they desire? And who is better than Allah to judge for a people who are sure?" Holy Qur'an (5:50)

Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (a.s.) has stated:

"Judgement is two kinds: the judgement of Allah, the Great and Almighty, and the judgement of

the people of ignorance `Jahiliyah'. So, whoever misses Allah's judgement, surely will judge according to the judgement of `Jahiliyah'." To give man a clear idea of the aims and purposes which Islam strives to achieve, the Qur'an tells him about these aims and purposes:

"And thus did We reveal to you an inspired Book by Our command. You knew not what the Book was, nor (what) Faith (was), but We made it a light, guiding thereby whom We please of Our servants..." Holy Qur'an (42:52)

"...and We have revealed the Book to you explaining all things, and guidance and mercy and good news for those who submit (themselves to Allah)." Holy Qur'an (16:89) The Qur'an also describes the faithful believers, those who follow the way of faith and know the right path. It has shown that they are guided aright and live in safety, security, and peace: "Those who believe and mix not up their faith with iniquity -those are they for whom is security and they are (the ones) guided aright." Holy Qur'an (6:83)

That is because they have believed in Allah and the light that has come from Him. They have followed the way of righteousness and have not mixed their belief with oppression nor deviated from Allah's path and His `shari'ah'. Rather they have conformed to Allah's laws, commands and teachings. Therefore, they are rightly guided, safe, and happy here and in the Hereafter. Unlike the true believers, those who have led themselves towards error, deviation and misguidance and turned away from Allah's remembrance, have turned their lives into an inferno and a torment. The Qur'an describes their life and end as follows:

"And whoever turns away from My monition, verily his shall be a life straitened, and We shall raise him up on the Day of Judgment, blind. He shall say: `O, my Lord! why have you raised me blind? Whereas indeed I was seeing (before)?' (Allah) will say: `Thus (is the recompense) for did come to you Our signs but you did ignore them; and even so are you forsaken this Day.'" Holy Qur'an (20:124-126)

Because of their turning away from Allah's remembrance, refusing and disobeying the true will, they have gone astray. They have blundered in the darkness of ignorance and deviation. Allah, the Exalted, says:

"...and whoever disobeys Allah and His Apostle, indeed he has strayed off a manifest straying." Holy Qur'an (33:36)

"Have you then seen him who takes as his god his vain desires, and Allah has allowed him to be astray (with his), knowing (it), and set a seal upon his ear and his heart and caused upon his eyes a veil; who can guide him after (his being allowed to stray by) Allah? What! Will you not then reflect?" Holy Qur'an (45:23)

So, this is the reality of `jahiliyah', i. e., deviation from the religion of Allah, refusing His

message, disobeying His Apostles, adoring lusts and temptations, and obeying the tyrants and the aggressors. Finally, if we study similar ideas of ignorant life, we will reach the following conclusions:

`Jahiliyah' (Global ignorance) was a social disease. It was a psychological state afflicting individuals, peoples, and nations in each period and generation. The aspects of this ignorant life are quite similar regardless of time and place. Allah, the Exalted, says:

"In their hearts is a disease, Allah increases their disease,..." Holy Qur'an (2:10)

"And say those (pagans) who know not: `Why does not Allah speak to us or a sign come to us?' Even thus said those before them; the like of what they say. Their hearts are all alike; We have indeed made clear the signs to people who are certainly sure." Holy Qur'an (2:118)

The evidence to this similarity is the long history of mankind, the succession of nations and offsprings, the appearance of the symptoms of the ignorant life in many generations and nations in each period of history, and the deviation from the right path and the call to guidance and the Prophets.

On the pages of history and life's stage, we see standing examples belonging to the past and present life of mankind-we see atheism, oppression, tyranny, terrorism, bloodshedding, loss of truth, persecution of the oppressed, exploiting the poor, and widespread vices.

These are the reflections of the ignorant current on the life of mankind. This current represents deviation from the truth, justice, belief. Consequently, bewilderment, going astray, and deviation from the straight path are the most important marks of `Jahiliyah' from which man suffered too much crises and endured their pains.