

Quranic Verses Misinterpreted as Teaching Violence

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The interpretation of the verses of the Quran is normally made with reference to the historical, grammatical and theme aspects of the verses.

Some of the Quranic verses were revealed addressing issues current to that time of history, while others were revealed addressing a general principle or a matter applicable to every time and place. All verses serve as guidance for Muslims.

The substance addressed to a specific location with specific people may or may not apply to subjects outside the scope of the verses. Unless the addressees are elucidated, the Quranic verses would not be interpreted correctly.

Misinterpretation of the verses of the Quran occurs when the historical, grammatical and theme contextual aspects are not taken into consideration.

Unfortunately, some people wrongly accuse Islam of teaching violence based on an improper understanding of a few verses of the Quran that were actually addressed to a specific group of people, with a specific historical background. We will explore these verses in the light of their historical framework and of the subject matter in order to bring about their correct meaning and purpose.

The first to be addressed is verse 191 from Chapter 2:191. This verse is misunderstood to command Muslims to kill disbelievers, Christians and Jews.

In order for us to study this verse within its historical and subject matter context, we need to consider verse 190 as well. Verses 190-191 say:

{And fight in the cause of God those who have (initially) waged war against you, but do not transgress limits (by causing more damage to your enemy than the damage they initially caused you, thereby expanding the circle of war). Indeed, Allah loves not transgressors.

And slay them wherever you overtake them and expel them from where they have expelled you (a reference to Quraysh who for 14 years had been expelling the Muslims from Makkah), for tumult and oppression (that Quraysh heavily incurred on you) are worse than killing; but fight them not at the Inviolable House of Worship, unless they (first) fight you there. If they were to fight you, then do not be reluctant to kill them. Such is the recompense of the disbelievers (in the sanctity of the Holy Shrine of Ka'ba).}
(Al-Baqarah [2: 190-91](#))

Considering the history surrounding these verses, we learn that they were revealed after the peace treaty of Hudaibiyah signed between the Idolaters of Quraysh and the Muslims in the year six after emigration, and prior to the performing of one of the treaty's conditions. This condition states that the Muslims visit Makkah and perform the Lesser Pilgrimage in the following year.

At the time to perform the Lesser Pilgrimage in the following year, some Muslims were concerned that Quraysh may not fulfill its promise in allowing the Muslims to enter Makkah and conversely attack them while performing their rituals. This legitimate concern was indeed answered by God in the above verses. In case Quraysh broke the Hudaibiyah peace agreement by attacking the Muslims during the pilgrimage, only

then Muslims were commanded to defend themselves and were given the details of how to act in the battlefield.

Muslims were told to kill the Idolaters wherever they may come upon them and to drive them away from wherever they initially drove them away. Muslims also were commanded to preserve the old sanctity of the Shrine of Ka'bah by not fighting in it **{But fight them not at the Sacred Mosque, unless they [first] fight you there.}**

Note in verse 190 the subject of the verb "fight" is the clause **{those who have [initially] waged war against you}**. This descriptive clause is making direct reference to Quraysh and could not be mistaken by any other than the Idolaters of Quraysh.

Similarly, the first part of verse 191, the subject of the verbs "slay," "overtake," and "expel" is Quraysh, who earlier had expelled the Muslims from Makkah. The second part of verse 191, however, a new descriptive word, *kafireen*, is given to the subject to-be-killed for fighting in the Sacred Mosque. The word *kafireen* (disbelievers) can take two possible meanings:

- a. Quraysh who is the reference in the previous verse and who is also the guardian of the Holy Shrine, and,
- b. Specific people of Quraysh who disbelieved in the age-old sanctity of the Ka'bah and incurred violence within it. If Quraysh or those who disbelieved in the age-old sanctity of the Ka'bah fight you, only then do not be reluctant to kill them.

The majority of the Quranic interpreters took the word *kafireen* in the second part of verse 191 to mean the Idolaters of Quraysh as a whole. Other interpreters took the word *kafireen* to be those who incurred violence within the Holy Shrine of Ka'bah from amongst Quraysh.

Dr. Fathi Othman in his book *The Concepts of the Quran* is one of those who took this approach. Dr. Othman's approach seems to be the more accurate one, since the requital of killing is made to the subject in the second part of the verse 191, those who 'disbelieved in the sanctity' of the Inviolable House of Worship.

In either case, the word disbelievers in verse 191 cannot be taken to mean Christians nor Jews or any disbeliever other than Quraysh. Thus, the claim that Islam teaches violence is proven false. On the contrary, many see these two verses as ground for Islam's quest for peace. Such that even when Muslims were commanded to fight in self defense, they were instructed to practice war-morality: Do not start a fight. But fight in the cause of God those who initially fight you, but do not transgress limits thereby expanding the circle of war.

The word "limit" is interpreted by the majority of scholars as "limiting enemy's loss only to their own." Any more loss beyond that is considered transgression. Thus, the verse teaches Muslims not to start hostility and to use hostility-stopping techniques if war ever started.

Causing more damage to the enemy is an invitation to more violence. Furthermore, the Quran commands Muslims that if the opponents inclined towards truce, they are to seek an end to hostilities. God said:

{But if the enemy inclined to peace, then incline to it.} (Al-Anfal [8: 61](#))

Reflecting on this Islamic fundamental teaching, Karen Armstrong in her book, *Muhammad, A Biography of the Prophet* stated:

"The Quran teaches that war is always abominable. Muslims must never open hostilities, ...but, once they have taken a war,

Muslims must fight with absolute commitment in order to bring the fighting to an end as soon as possible." (209)

Studying the Quranic verses in the light of its historical context is an ever important matter in understanding Islam, its people and their culture.

The second verse to be examined is verse five from chapter At-Tawbah, or Declaration of Disassociation. In order to do a fair study of the verse, again, its subject matter context must be considered along with other verses that were revealed with it. Additional consideration must be given to the events and time period in which these verses were revealed.

Purifying Makkah: The Center of Orientation for All Muslims

Chapter 9, Declaration of Disassociation, was revealed to Prophet Muhammad during the second Pilgrimage season after the opening of Makkah. The subject of the first several verses of this chapter was to dissolve all treaty obligations, with few exceptions with the Idolaters of Quraysh, including the Hdaybiyah Treaty.

The Hdaybiyah Treaty of peace was broken after the attack that Quraysh conducted against one of the tribes in the confederacy of the Muslims. After the breach of the Hdaybiyah Treaty, the Prophet led an army of 10 thousand people and peacefully entered his native city Makkah without any bloodshed. Then, the Prophet pardoned the Makkans, whom, at large, entered Islam and the 360 idols around the Ka'bah were destroyed.

Some of Makkah's inhabitants however still practiced idol worship. Some of the tribes residing around Makkah, who did not embrace Islam, would bring their idols along with them to the Sacred Mosque for worship during the Pilgrimage season. There were other idol worship traditions such as the total

removal of clothing during the ritual fulfillment. An idol-worshipping Pilgrimage tradition was to remove all their clothes that they had worn during committing sins in order for their Pilgrimage to be accepted by God. These traditions conflicted with the Islamic standards of decency and spirituality and the purpose of the pilgrimage.

After the opening of Makkah, Prophet Muhammad did not attend the following two Pilgrimages in it. Perhaps, the reasons for this were the fact that he had to give ample time to those who did not accept Islam to evaluate their situation and to recognize the value and dimensions of Islam. The process of changing customs and habits takes time. If this natural process was violated, problems and violence can occur, therefore the Prophet managed accordingly to give peace a chance, proving once more Islam's ever quest for peace.

Nevertheless, after two years from the opening of Makkah and during the second Pilgrimage season, God revealed the Chapter of Declaration of Disassociation, that among other things addressed the total termination of idol worshipping in and around the city of Makkah. Makkah, which holds the primordial faith of Abraham and the whole of humanity, is to be the sacred center of orientation of all Muslims. The process of returning Makkah to its original sanctuary was made in several steps, one of which is used by some westerners to accuse Islam of being a religion that teaches violence. Here are the steps outlined in these verses:

1. To announce to the pilgrims, led by Abu Bakr, that God and His Prophet disassociate themselves from the Idolaters, who violated the agreements of peace and that there will be no more agreements made between the Muslims and the Idolaters in the future.
2. Any existing agreement (or part thereof) with the Idolaters, such as that with the tribes of Nadheer and

Kenanah, shall be honored until its appointed time or until they breach the agreement.

We must pause here to note Islam's quest for peace and justice by continuing to honor the agreement of Hdaybiyah with the tribes of Nadheer and Kenanah, who did not collaborate with Quraysh in breaching the peace treaty.

3. There will be no more idol worshiping in the Sacred places (Makkah and the Sacred Mosque). Note: the sanctity of Makkah with respect to Muslims is much like the Vatican City with respect to Christians.

4. A period of four months to be given as a respite to those who chose to keep worshipping idols to either leave the Sacred places or embrace Islam, and

5. A severe warning of actual war, after the respite period against idolaters who insisted that they would stay in the sacred places and refused to accept Islam. It is this verse and its severe warning to the idolaters that is misused today to accuse Islam of teaching violence by killing disbelievers, Christians and Jews.

Let us now read verses one through five of chapter nine, Declaration of Disassociation, to illustrate this misunderstanding and to show the true perspectives of the verse.

{(This is a declaration of) disassociation, from Allah and His Messenger to those whom you had made a treaty among the Idolaters (*mushrikeen*).

So travel safely and freely, (O disbelieving Idolaters), throughout the land (during) four months but know that you cannot cause failure to God and that Allah will disgrace the disbelievers.

And (it is) an announcement from God and His Messenger to the people on the day of the greater Pilgrimage (Hajj) that God is disassociated from the disbelievers, and (so is) His Messenger. So if you repent, that is best for you; but if you turn away - then know that you will not cause failure to God. And give tidings to those who disbelieve of painful punishment.

Excepted are those with whom you made a treaty (limited by appointed time or condition) among the Idolaters and then they have not been deficient toward you in anything or supported any one against you; so complete for them their treaty until their term (has ended). Indeed God loves the righteous (who are fully aware of Him).

And when the sacred months have passed, then kill the Idolaters (*mushrikeen*) wherever you find them and capture them and besiege them and sit in wait for them at every place of ambush. But if they should repent, establish prayer, and give charity (*zakah*), let them go on their way. Indeed Allah is Forgiving Merciful.} (At-Tawbah [9: 1-5](#))

To remove the misunderstanding, two basic points must be addressed here. Firstly, the multiple meaning of the Arabic word "*mushrikeen*," and also the Islamic mechanism for the prevention of war by means of severe threat.

The Multiple Meaning of the Arabic Word "*Mushrikeen*."

The word *musrikeen* we encountered in the above verses is the plural of the word *mushrik*, from the base verb *shirk*. *Shirk* in the religious sense is worshipping "other things" with God. "Other things" can be idols, people, materialistic things such as money and wealth and can even be position and power. The common English word for *shirk* is polytheism. In the above verse, however, the word *mushrikeen* applies to the Idolaters

of Makkah and cannot be interpreted as the Christians and the Jews.

To comply with the interpretation's contextual aspects of the place, time and subject matter, *mushrikeen* in this case should only be translated as "Idolaters of Quraysh," who are the subject matter of the above verses and whom the declaration of disassociation was to be addressed to.

Unfortunately some English translations of the Quran inaccurately translated the above word '*mushrikeen*,' into its generic form as 'polytheists,' thus creating a major problem, especially among the non-Arabic reading audience. It is good to note that Yusuf Ali, Pickthall and M. H. Shakir's translations, which are among the most trusted translations, accurately gave the meaning of *mushrikeen* as 'idolaters' in this context.

Over and over again, the Quran insists that the People of the Book (Christians and Jews) are to enjoy a special treatment from Muslims and that Islam did not cancel out the teachings of the previous apostles like Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Job, Moses, David, Solomon, and Jesus. Consequently, it is not possible that verse 2: 191 can be read to imply the killing of Christians and Jews. Let us relate few of the verses that call for special treatment of the People of the Book.

{The food of the People of the Book is lawful unto you (Muslims) and your food is lawful unto them.} (Al-Ma'idah [5: 5](#))

A Muslim man is permitted to take in marriage, the most intimate relation and sacred bond, a Jewish or Christian woman:

{Lawful unto you in marriage are (not only) chaste women who are believers, but chaste women among the People of the Book revealed before your time when you give them

their due dowers and desire chastity, and not lewdness, taking them as lovers.} (Al-Ma'idah [5: 5](#))

{Not all of them are alike: of the People of the Book are a portion that stand (for the right); they rehearse the signs of God all night long and they prostrate themselves in adoration.} (Al-Imran [3: 113](#))

{Those who believe (in the Quran), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians, and the Sabians, any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.} (Al-Baqarah [2: 62](#))

The Islamic Mechanism for the Prevention of War by Means of Severe Threat

Similar to the Islamic philosophy of severe punishment for prevention of vice and corruption, the Quran uses the belief of severe threat of war to prevent an actual war. The psychological effect of severe war on people causes them to change or compromise in order to eliminate the war. This policy of avoiding war by the mere fact of its threat is very much like avoiding a traffic citation because of its severe penalty. This technique seems to work well. For more information on this subject, see our posted article: "[Reflections on Punishment in the Islamic Law.](#)"

It is only fair in some cases, such as the example above, where the majority of the Makkans had accepted Islam and an ample of time was given for the people who did not convert to reexamine their idol worship beliefs. The Idolaters were threatened with war if they did not move away from Makkah or if they continued idol worship within the Sacred city. This diplomacy of threat averted war, and consequently no one left Makkah. Thus, the diplomatic threat language of war in verse

[9:5](#), dealing with the restoration of Makkah to its original sanctity, served as a psychological tool to prevent war.

The third verse to be explored is verse 29 of Chapter 9. The verse establishes that the People of the Book resident in an Islamic state, who are exempted from defending the state shall pay a defense-obligation exemption fee called *jizyah*. If they refused to pay the *jizyah*, then the state is obligated to obtain it by force. The verse clearly states:

{And fight against those who - despite having the Book (aforetime) - do not (truly) believe either in God or in the Last Day, nor consider forbidden that which God and the Conveyor of His Message have forbidden, nor follow the religion of truth (which God has enjoined upon them) until they agree to the payment of the exemption tax (of defense-obligations, *jizyah*) by those who afford it, and acknowledge their subjection (to the state).} (At-Tawbah [9:29](#))

The nature of this verse with respect to fighting is not antagonistic because of ethnicity, but rather over monetary and regulatory issues within the state. A similar policy is applicable to the Muslims themselves when they refuse to pay their dues to the state.

In the same manner Christians and Jews are obligated to pay the state *jizyah*, Muslims are obligated to pay to the state *zakat*. *Zakat* is a form of taxation similar to the tax that most people have to pay to their respective states. In similar manner to the case of *jizyah* with respect to the People of the Book, if Muslims, too, refused to pay *zakat*, then the state is obligated to obtain it by force. An example of this was the case of the *Murtaddeen*, several tribes, who, during the rule of first Caliph Abu Bakr refused to pay *zakat*, a war was conducted against them until they paid it, and acknowledged their subjection to the state.

In conclusion, the notion that the Quran teaches intolerant violence is false. Islam's fabric is engrained in peaceful concepts and philosophies. The evidence is overwhelming regarding Islam's acceptance and special regard for the People of the Book. And as for those who worship stones, Islam established that they should abandon their practice and repent. But if they insist on their practice of idol worship, it must not be conducted within the Sacred House of Ka'bah, the orientation point of all Muslims and the primordial faith of Abraham.

Clarifications of interpretations in the correct historical context and more dialogue will promote goodwill and better understanding amongst all people.

Works Cited:

Karen Armstrong. *Muhammad, A Biography of the Prophet*. US: HarperCollins, 1993

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