

ESSAYS ON FAITH: MANY MISUNDERSTAND VERSES FROM HOLY QURAN

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Byline: IMAM MOHAMMAD JAMAL DAOUDI

Editor's note: Daoudi, the imam, or spiritual leader, of the Islamic Association of West Virginia, recently began a series of sermons on misunderstood verses from the holy scriptures used by Muslims from the Quran. Parts of those sermons are reprinted here.

The Quran is the holy book revered and followed by Muslims as the final testament and guidance from God to humanity revealed to His chosen prophet and messenger, Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him). Muslims consider the Holy Quran as the most authentic of God's revelations in its accuracy, completeness, and inclusiveness.

A long time ago, even before Sept. 11, some people attempted to interpret some verses of the Quran on their own without following the proper Islamic methods to understand and explain the textual verses. This, simply put, led to taking the verses out of context without referring to the situation of the revelation of those particular verses, neither taking into consideration other relevant or related verses, nor the linguistic meanings and nuances of the Arabic language. Unfortunately, this has led to a huge misunderstanding of Islam itself.

Context must be considered

The Quran was revealed over the span of 23 years of the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBHU) who struggled to replace paganism with monotheism. While he carried out his divinely ordained mission, he naturally faced certain challenging situations requiring immediate divine guidance and answers to which the Quran relates. Some of those situations were confirmed in their significance by the Divine Presence while others were corrected. The prophet, in his ways, upheld the ways of the prophets of old in this regard. The Quran was revealed in the midst of actual life, as lived and experienced by Prophet Muhammad; hence, addressing and relating to all of life's circumstances that the prophet faced both on the personal level and communal while delivering God's message. This naturally entails a wide area of divine commentary on human life and its activities, whether dealing with worship, habits or social and political issues. Therefore, it is extremely important for anyone wanting and willing to study or read into Quranic verses that they simultaneously learn and understand the context surrounding each verse or chapters. To read the Quran for purposes of worship and piety is one thing, but to derive meaning and mandates of social or legal significance quite another.

After furnishing this introduction, I would like to say some verses from the Quran have repeatedly been and continue to be misinterpreted by both extremist and radical Muslims as well as people of other faiths and inclinations without following the true and genuine Islamic methodology developed by scholars over 14 centuries of serious and lifelong effort.

Some misinterpreted verses

To address certain of these verses, I started a four-part series of Friday services at the Islamic Association of West Virginia in South Charleston dedicated to opening the discussion toward proper understanding of the Quran and trying to explain those verses to my Muslim and non-Muslim brothers and sisters, especially in light of current issues revolving around desecration of the Holy Quran. The four verses are from Chapter 9. Two of them are discussed in this writing. The other two will be published later.

Chapter 9, verse 5 reads: "But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the pagans/idolaters when you find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem of war. But if they repent and establish regular prayers, and practice regular charity, then open the way for them for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful."

Some base-line facts first:

- The Quran has 114 chapters that vary in length.
- Allah is the name of God in Arabic - the same God who spoke to Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Them All).
- The forbidden months are four months on the Muslim lunar calendar (which has been a confirmed continuation of pre-Islamic Arabian practice in order to preserve and promote peaceful coexistence amongst the warring tribes of the time). During these months, Muslims were requested to observe more peaceful actions and worship. One third of the Muslim calendar should be observed in this fashion, not only with other Muslims but all of humanity.
- Pagans are those who worship idols in addition to God claiming that the "idol," in and of itself, will bring them closer to God.

Christians and people of Jewish faith are named throughout the Quran as (Ahl al-Kitaab) "People of the Book," in honor and recognition that they are the bearers of divine revelation and guidance aforesaid through the Torah of Moses and the Gospel of Jesus. The followers of Christianity or Judaism are in no way to be considered pagans or infidels. The Quran and the prophetic teaching as understood by the genuine Islamic heritage and scholarship are emphatically clear with regard to this. Only those who are weak in their basic knowledge of Islam and Arabic misrepresent this fact.

A historical background

In the books of history it is written that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) did make many treaties with the pagans of Mecca (his birthplace) for the sake of business and in order to deliver his message of monotheism (Islam). Those people were divided or considered in three groups. The first, which did not fulfill or carry through with the mandates of the treaties; they violated the rules agreed upon multiple times and conspired with others to malign and disenfranchise the young and fragile Muslim community. The second group did not completely fulfill their oath either; however, they did not conspire with others against the Muslims. The third group constituted those of the pagans who fulfilled the terms of the treaties and did not assist others nor

conspire against Muslims in any way and, hence, remained true and honest in their dealings with the Muslims according to the treaty. Now, with regard to those who broke their treaty, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was hesitant in knowing how to deal with them since it happened to occur during the forbidden months - when Muslims were not allowed to engage in any type of warfare. Here it is where Allah revealed the above-mentioned verses to Prophet Muhammad informing him with regard to how he should act and deal with such groups: with the first and second group, a grace period of four months was given to allow them freedom to go wherever they wished, after which time they had the option to either become Muslims by believing in one God, praying to Him alone, and thereafter paying charities to the poor as proof of their true belief; and, to keep honoring and fulfilling the treaties with the third pagan group as long as they continued to mutually honor and fulfill theirs. It is noteworthy to quote here a Quranic commentary by the now-deceased contemporary Muslim scholar and translator of the Quran, Muhammad Asad, with regard to the above verse: "...the above verse relates to warfare already in progress with people who have become guilty of a breach of treaty obligations and of aggression."

This is how we need to correctly read and understand the background and significance of the above verse. The allowance of fighting by way of warfare was directly due to violation of their promises and terms of treaty and not because of or as a result of their religious beliefs, despite the fact that pagan ideology conflicted with Abrahamic monotheism.

A more in-depth look

Let us now look at verses 1 through 7 of the same chapter for a more contextual and informative reading confirming the above interpretation:

Verse 1: A declaration of immunity from Allah and His Messenger, to those of the pagans with whom you have contracted mutual alliances.

Verse 2: Go you, then, for four months, backwards and forwards, as you will, throughout the land, but know you that you cannot frustrate Allah by your falsehood, but that Allah will cover with shame those who reject Him.

Verse 3: And an announcement from Allah and His Messenger to the people (assembled) on the day of the great pilgrimage - that Allah and His Messenger dissolve (treaty) obligations with the Pagans. If, then, you repent, it were best for you, but if you turn away, know you that you cannot frustrate Allah. And proclaim a grievous penalty to those who reject faith.

Verse 4: (But the treaties are) not dissolved with those pagans with whom you have entered into alliance and who have not subsequently failed you in aught, nor aided anyone against you. So fulfill your engagements with them to the end of their term: for Allah loves the righteous.

Verse 5: But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the pagans/idolaters [those who have breached the terms of the treaty] when you find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war). But if they repent and establish regular prayers, and practice regular charity, then open the way for them for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

Verse 6: If one amongst the Pagans ask you for asylum, grant it to him, so that he may hear the Word of Allah; and then escort him to where he can be secure. That is because they are men without knowledge.

Verse 7: How can there be a league, before Allah and His Messenger, with the pagans, except those with whom you made a treaty near the Sacred Mosque? As long as these stand true to you, stand you true to them for Allah does love the righteous.

And similarly the chapter continues to explain the behavioral sense of such people who do not value the ties of kinship and covenant.

Therefore, I ask you, is it fair and correct by any genuine and meaningful goodness, to take a few words out of their textual and historical context and, thereafter, call upon Muslims to go out and "slay" people of other faiths?! And only God knows best.

Fighting was a defense

The second part of the series dealt with verse 29 from Chapter 9 which reads: "Fight against those who do not believe in Allah, nor in the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which has been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the Religion of Truth, from among the People of the Book, until they pay the jizya [a specified exemption tax] with a willing hand, and feel themselves subdued [after having been humbled in war]."

So, a quick and superficial reading of this verse gives the impression Muslims should go and fight the Christians and the Jews (People of the Book) until they pay that special tax and be subdued.

This whole chapter was revealed upon Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) after the battle of Tabuk when it was confirmed to the prophet that the Roman emperor (of professed Christian faith) had prepared an army to invade Medina, the center of Islam at that time, and extinguish the Muslims. There was an earlier unfinished battle a few years before called the battle of Mu'tah where the Romans had killed the ambassador of Prophet Muhammad, violating the established world tradition and normative immunity of ambassadors. Prophet Muhammad did march and participate in that campaign as a result. It was, however, a very hard and undecided battle that ended without a victor. The Muslim community and Prophet Muhammad monitored that region and, subsequently, learnt of the preparation by the Roman emperor a few years later; so, he marched toward them to meet them outside of Medina, thereby to reduce civilian casualties. Fortunately, he did not find any of the Roman soldiers willing to engage in battle, hesitant that, by chance, Muhammad may, in fact, be the prophet of the Last Time that they had read about in their ancient books, including the Bible. The verse, however, deals with and is instructing the Muslims of the continuation of the fight against those who perpetrated and began the aggression in the first place (in origin) with the sole intent to extinguish the prophetic light and message without any due consideration to either the newly revealed message of God nor to their own faith traditions and laws. Allah considered those people of the time as ones who did not truly believe in Him nor in the Day of Judgment and as among those who were engaged in, rather, in creating, mischief on earth and killing innocents (i.e. ambassadors), nor did they recognize the true law of

their own faith (Christianity). Hence, to continue the strong policy against such until they were defeated.

A tithing for protection

Before we jump to any conclusion or reaction, let me explain the meaning of jizya first. In Arabic, all words are derived from primal letter roots; the root origin of this word comes from the word reflecting or meaning a sort or type of reward or satisfaction. This reward ("jizya") was not to be taken for losing the war - not at all. It was in exchange for extending protection to the conquered territory/people by the ruling Muslim army or governing body and for providing all the public utilities, school systems, churches, synagogues, temples, freeways, ...etc. It is more like the federal and state tax in our recent days. Yet this type of tax would be collected from the potential and eligible fighting males (who may be capable of bearing arms) only; women, children, seniors, clergies, slaves or mentally handicapped people were not required to pay. The amount of this tax varied with the richness of the people. For example, it was collected as one dinar, or one dollar per person per year in some circumstances. The recorded Islamic history books relate that the Muslims gave back the jizya to the Christians of Homs (a city in the middle of Syria now) when they felt that they would not be able to protect them against the Romans. The irony was that the Christians of Homs, after having lived under Muslim rule at the time, preferred to fight alongside the Muslims against the avenging Roman Empire under which they had suffered injustice and oppression earlier. If we take into consideration that the Muslim adult (male and female) has to pay 2.5 percent of his savings every year as a kind of obligatory tax to fulfill one of the five pillars of Islam, it is easy to see that jizya was actually of minimal contribution by the minority populace.

Returning to the verse, I want to say the context, again, was that of a fight against those who initiated and were engaged in military warfare against the Muslim community. This meaning is confirmed by verse 90 in Chapter 4 when it reads: "...Therefore, if they withdraw from you but fight you not, and instead send you (guarantees of) peace, then Allah has opened no way for you to war against them."

Let us, once again, reflect upon the commentary by the late Muhammad Asad on verse 29:

"...Thus, jizya is no more and no less than an exemption tax in lieu of military service and in compensation for the 'covenant of protection' (dhimmah) accorded to such citizens by the Islamic state. (The term itself is derived from the verb jaza, 'he rendered [something] as a satisfaction,' or 'as a compensation [in lieu of something else]' - cf. Lane II, 422.) No fixed rate has been set either by the Quran or by the Prophet for this tax, but from all available traditions it is evident that it is to be considerably lower than the tax called zakah ("the purifying dues") to which Muslims are liable and which - because it is a specifically Islamic religious duty - is naturally not to be levied on non-Muslims. Only such of the non-Muslim citizens who, if they were Muslims, would be expected to serve in the armed forces of the state are liable to the payment of jizya, provided that they can easily afford it. Accordingly, all non-Muslim citizens whose personal status or condition would automatically free them from the obligation to render military service are statutorily - that is, on the basis of clear-cut ordinances promulgated by the Prophet - exempted from the payment of jizya: (a) all women, (b) males who have not yet reached full

maturity, (c) old men, (d) all sick or crippled men, (e) priests and monks. All non-Muslim citizens who volunteer for military service are obviously exempted from the payment of jizya."

I hope I have cleared up some of the misunderstanding about two of the often misquoted and misinterpreted verses of the Quran. And only God knows best.

Daoudi is the imam of the Islamic Association of West Virginia.

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