

ESSAYS ON FAITH: QURANIC PASSAGES ON WAR MISINTERPRETED

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This is the second in a series of sermons that explain misunderstood passages from the Quran. The first sermon ran in the July 17 Sunday Gazette-Mail.

Today we continue our study of verses from the Holy Quran and hadith (a narration about the life of the Prophet Muhammad [peace be upon him], or what he approved), both indispensable in understanding the teachings of Islam that are all too often misunderstood.

In the first, Chapter 9, Surah Al Tawbah (Repentance), verse 36, Allah (God) says: “Behold, the number of months, in the sight of God, is twelve months, [laid down] in God’s decree on the day He created the heavens and the earth; [and] out of these, four are sacred: this is the ever-true law of [God]. Do not, then, sin against yourselves with regard to these [months].”

This verse was revealed along with others that emphasized both the importance and the sanctity of these months. Traditionally, pre-Islamic Arab society also honored those four months of the lunar calendar by not fighting, arguing or doing any evil deeds during them. The Holy Quran, therefore, reaffirmed the sanctity of these months and told Muslims to continue to honor and respect them as a time of peace. That is, of course, unless they are attacked, at which time Allah allowed them to defend themselves.

Once these months were passed, in accordance with the principle of reciprocity, Muslims were to fight the Arab pagans “all together” who attacked and persecuted them. This interpretation was adopted by many eminent quranic scholars, men like Ibn Abbas (the cousin of Prophet Muhammad), Qatadah, Al-Suddi, and Al-Tabari (the Imam of the Interpreters of the Holy Quran). However, even with this interpretation of the phrase “all together” specifically referring to the pagans (and their allies) in the Prophet’s time by Islam’s most prominent scholars, over the years many Muslims have understood it to be a general principle of reciprocity to fight all who disagree with them. In other words, this verse — for some — meant they should fight against non-Muslims in general. This is where its misunderstanding came about for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The proper scholarly interpretation was for all Muslims to unite together and fight as one against those fighting them, no more, no less.

The next verse so often misinterpreted is found in Chapter 9, Surah Al Tawbah (Repentance), verse 41, where Allah (God) says: “Go you forth to war, whether it be easy or difficult [for you], and strive hard in God’s cause with your possessions, and your lives: this is for your own good — if you but knew it.”

This verse has often been misunderstood as an open invitation for everyone to go on the lesser jihad (defensive war against those attacking you, or your families, stealing your land or threatening Islam). This included young and old, rich or poor, healthy or sick, single or married, in whatever way they could, walking or riding. This may have been the understanding of those who based their interpretation on picking and choosing whatever verses suited them, without

referring to the many other verses on the subject in the Holy Quran detailing the conditions of such a significant activity. Imam Al-Tabari (the eminent interpreter of the Holy Quran) understood this invitation was limited to the Prophet Muhammad and his companions — in a specific time and situation — since it was revealed when they were preparing to go into their last battle against their pagan oppressors.

Over the years, however, many see this as an invitation to “join the Prophet” — by following his example (an especially meritorious gesture) — and not hesitate for a moment to defend themselves against perceived oppressors in their own time, whether themselves, or by using their money and wealth. However, general scholarly interpretation has restricted the use of this verse to being specifically “in the Cause of Allah [God],” thereby narrowing its applicability. Furthermore, general scholarly interpretation holds that such a jihad was to be initiated by the Prophet himself as the Head of State and Messenger of God. Ibn Qudamah (another eminent quranic scholar) challenged those who understood the verse to be an invitation for all to enter into jihad on any and all situations and occasions. In doing so, he referred to another quranic verse in support of his position.

He noted that in Chapter 4, Surah Al-Nisa (Women), verse 95, in the Holy Quran, Allah (God) says, “Such of the believers as remain passive — other than the disabled — cannot be deemed equal to those who strive hard in God’s cause with their possessions and their lives: God has exalted those who strive hard with their possessions and their lives far above those who remain passive. Although Allah (God) has promised the ultimate good to all [believers], yet has God exalted those who strive hard above those who remain passive by [promising them] a mighty reward.” Thus, those remained home and could not join the jihad would be rewarded, too, because it is not mandated for everyone every time and in every situation to go on jihad. The purpose of this verse was specifically to encourage the companions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to join him in his efforts against those who persecuted them.

The last teaching to be considered is a tradition (hadith) of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that has been misused and abused by ignorant Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: “I am commanded to fight people until they bear witness that there is no God but Allah (God) and Muhammad is a messenger of Allah; whoever said so their wealth and their life would be guarded and preserved unless they are found in previous violation against rights of others, and their final and ultimate judgment, accountability, and cases are before Allah (God).”

This statement of the Prophet is translated by the ignorant to mean that Muslims must force everyone to convert to Islam or die. However, in Arabic the two words “fight” and “people,” used in this context, have very specific meanings. The Arabic word translated into English as “fight,” comes from the Arabic verb *uqatil*. This word specifically refers to defensive fighting, both reciprocal in nature and, moreover, in a fight already in progress. It simply means Muslims can defend themselves against someone who attacks them.

Does the Prophet mean Muslims are commanded to kill? If so, he would have used a different verb. That word would be *aqtul*, “kill,” and not *uqatil*, “fight.” (In Arabic, which is a highly specific and incredibly complex language, especially quranic Arabic, which is a specialty all its own, a vowel change makes a huge difference in the meaning of a word). Among Islamic

scholars, no one disagrees that the meaning of the word in this hadith refers strictly to self-defense.

The second word to discuss here is “people.” In this hadith, it is translated from the Arabic word *al-Nass*. In Quran and hadith, *al-Nass* is used in numerous contexts, from referring to a group of Muslim hypocrites, pagan Arabs, non-Muslims (e.g., Christians and Jews), to Arabs in general. So, to understand its usage here, it is necessary to put it into the context in which it was used: it was a reference to the pagan Arabs of Mecca. At the time, the Muslims had been in continuous conflict for 22 years. Of these, 22 of the 23 years were years of persecution, conspiracy and assassination of the Muslims by Mecca’s pagan Arabs. These polytheistic pagan Arabs did not waste a chance to try to extinguish the monotheistic message and its adherents. The Meccans initiated nine wars against Muslims overall. They attacked the Muslims twice in Medina. They invited all the tribes of Arabia to fight this Messenger of God and his monotheistic message of one God.

The time the Prophet Muhammad made this statement was after the bloodless Muslim conquest of Mecca. He told his followers and companions that his time had come, and soon he would be leaving the world. He had delivered God’s message to mankind, and, therefore, his mission was complete. It was at this point when he referred to the pagan Meccans and mentioned he could not trust them any more than he had for the past 22 years. Then he addressed the pagan Arabs, saying they had only one of two choices: either to become Muslims, or to leave Arabia so Muslims could live there in peace and trust their neighbors. The Prophet said this was to purify Arabia and the Middle East from idolatry. Thereafter, the only worship allowed would be to the One God, the God of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad (peace be upon them).

So, putting this into historical context reveals a longtime war situation between the Muslims and the pagans and their allies. As for “People of the Book” (Christians and Jews), having received prior revelation, this did not refer to them. (The situation of the Christians and Jews was discussed in last month’s sermon.) As mentioned, the pagan Arabs were allowed one of three choices: to become Muslims, remain in Medina and share the expenses of defense, or fight the Muslims till the end.

This explanation of the quranic verses and hadith of Prophet Muhammad, and many like them, has governed Muslims and Islamic history since its beginnings. All would go well for Muslims as long as they practiced and followed Islam rightly and truly.

In this and the previous article, we studied the four most controversial and misunderstood quranic verses and hadith. In addition, it should be mentioned that there are more than 200 verses in the Quran that encourage and promote peace, tolerance and forgiveness. Finally, we spent much time explaining war and killing and the position of Islam with regard to both. So, where is the Islam of peace — if there is any? This will be the study for the next episode of our series, “Peace in Islam!”

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