

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE QUR'AN AS EXEMPLIFIED IN THEIR BEATING

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By Jacob Thomas

Students of the history of Islam across the last fourteen centuries cannot escape to notice the sad state of women in Islamic societies. Both in Shari'ah Law and in its daily application, the inferiority of women is evident to all objective observers. With rare exceptions, compared to men, they are definitely lesser beings and are treated accordingly by both Islamic society in general and the men in their lives in particular. They are granted few, if any, rights and privileges as such would be understood in Western societies.

Such a wretched view of women in Islamic culture has not gone unnoticed by many reforming Arab intellectuals. Their long-suffering, generous hearted women, who deserve ever so much better, are in need of rescue. One website fostering improvement in the lives of Muslim women is worthy of mention. It is the online website, *kwtanweer*, which has a special section dedicated to women. Rarely does a week go by without an article or an essay bringing to light the shocking inconsistencies that prevail in "husband-wife" relations, as well as in other areas of women's lives.

On 7 September, 2008, an essay appeared in *kwtanweer* with this striking headline: "***Violence against Women in the Qur'an, as exemplified in their Beating.***" FFI readers will no doubt be most interested in the rather unique and revolutionary genre of Islamic hermeneutics of the Qur'an espoused by the writer of the article. I will give, as usual, my analysis, followed by my comments. The author began with an introduction setting forth his main topic, followed by his theory based on the science of linguistics.

Introduction

"Throughout the long history of mankind, the place of women has been both problematic and enigmatic. Society has suffered from the intrusion of religion into the various areas of life, even into its most intimate details, both public and private."

The Qur'an and the Maturing of the Divine Message

"According to the science of linguistics, there are three basic elements in discourse: the **sender, the receptor, and the message**. It is assumed that an ability to "break" the code in the communication between the sender of the message and its receptor does exist. This ability includes the right of the receptor to add a new meaning to the original message, thus not allowing the sender a unilateral authority to determine its meaning. Rather,

having received the message, it should be the right of all receptors, or readers, to interpret the message and apply it in their life.

“As we follow this linguistic theory, we may consider the sender as **Allah**, the receptors are the **Muslims**, and the **Message is the Qur’an**. Now we are in position to pose these questions: *Was the sender’s message mature? Was the receptor convinced by the message? And was the message clear, and in no need of interpretation?*

“The Qur’an represents itself as the last Holy Book of a monotheistic religion, namely, Islam. The divine origin of the Qur’an --- according to the claim of Muslims --- implies that it should exhibit the highest levels of maturity, wholeness, and righteousness with respect to human relations in general, and to the relations between men and women, in particular.

“Now if Islam is the apex of the Divine revelations, and if Muhammad is the seal of the Messengers and Prophets of Allah, does the Qur’an actually manifest a level of maturity that would offer solutions to the problems between men and women within the context of marriage? And does the Message possess those conditions of acceptability in its original milieu, as well as for all time and all places? Or has its Message become a victim of various illegitimate and novel readings and interpretations that are totally at variance with Allah’s intentions?!!”

“Beating” in the Qur’an

“One of the clearest examples of the teachings of the Qur’an is the subject of “*wife-beating*” as it appears in *Surat Al-Nisa*’ (Women) verses 34, 35.

As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them.

Marmaduke’s Translation

As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (Next), refuse to share their beds, (And last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them Means (of annoyance): For Allah is Most High, great (above you all).

Yusuf Ali’s Translation

“We limit ourselves in this essay to the study of the bodily harm as prescribed by the Qur’an, i.e. .“*beating*,” which is considered as a proper solution to the problems that inevitably arise between husbands and wives.”

The Interpretation of “Ayat al-Darb (Beating)”

“While the “Divine” text appears very clear, Muslim receptors of the message have offered different and varied interpretations of this *Ayat*. Some agree with its obvious meaning, others try to minimize the intensity of the punishment by suggesting that some

women would repent merely by being kept away from the conjugal bed. Others insist that some form of beating must take place. Both Sunni and Shi'ite exegetes have agreed that "**beating**" is clearly taught in the text, and is necessary to make women reasonable in their conduct. They only disagree as to the degree or kind of the "**beating.**"

What the Primary Sender (Allah) had Said in His Earlier Messages

"In the Old Testament (known in Arabic as the *Tawrat*, or *Old Testament*) we have very strict standards regarding sexual sins, such as in the *Book of Leviticus* 21: 9

"Also the daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by harlotry, she profanes her father; she shall be burned with fire."

New American Standard Bible (©1995)

"And the daughter of any priest, if she profane herself by playing the whore, she profaneth her father: she shall be burnt with fire."

King James Bible

"Now when we come to the New Testament (known in Arabic as (*Injeel*)) we notice a tremendous progress in the teachings regarding husband-wife relations, where we find a marked improvement in the status of women. We think, for example, of Jesus' attitude towards a woman caught in adultery as related in the Gospel according to John, chapter 8

3 And the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the midst, 4 they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. 5 "Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?" 6 And they were saying this, testing Him, in order that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down, and with His finger wrote on the ground. 7 But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

"In the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 19, we read the following account:

3 The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? 4 And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, 5 And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? 6 Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.

"We may also refer to the **Letter of Paul to the Church in the city of Ephesus**, Chapter 5: verses 22-25, and notice the progress in husband-wife relations:

22 Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. 23 For the

husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. 24 Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. 25 Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it.

“Now if we take into account the thesis we have propounded above, we would expect the Qur’an to exhibit the highest level of maturity, wholeness, and righteousness with respect to human relations in general, and to family relations in particular, such as between husbands and wives.

“As we study the texts of the Jewish and Christian holy books, we find no clear reference to a physical punishment such as **“beating”** that should be inflicted on a wife. Now, it is true that the Old Testament books do relate severe punishments for misbehaving women, but when we come to the New Testament, we find that those punishments have totally disappeared.

“But as we come to the Qur’an, do we find a higher level of evolution and maturity in the laws that govern husband-wife relations? Not at all! In contrast, do we find the duty of **“beating”** a wife in the teachings of Jesus Christ, or of his disciples after him? On the contrary, we discover this teaching as related in Mathew 5:17 **“Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.”**

“We expect that any message coming from the **Primary Messenger, i.e. Allah**, should be more understanding of the conditions of the receptors whose intellectual capabilities have been growing, and therefore are now capable to receive a more mature message. Is **“beating,”** as a punishment and a weapon in the hands of a man over against a woman, the only mature “Divine” method to deal with those problems that arise within the family? It has been claimed that the Qur’an came (when the Arabs were living in absolute ignorance, were prone to kill their daughters at birth, and tyrannize their wives,) in order to improve women’s conditions. However, this claim is not sustainable.

“First of all, it is a myth that the Arabs, before Islam, were living in darkness and ignorance. We know much better than that. They, and the other nations nearby, had accomplished high levels in science and literature.

“Second, if we restrict the Qur’anic teachings to the Arabs, it follows that it becomes a book that concerns them alone, and possesses no authority for other peoples and nations who were far more advanced than the Arabs.

“Had the Qur’an been a **fulfillment** of the previously-given **“Heavenly Messages,”** as the Muslims claim, it would have evidenced a higher degree of maturity, imparting final and reasonable solutions to all of mankind’s problems, including the proper way of treating women.”

To sum up

“Therefore, we may conclude that the Qur’anic discourse was actually a purely Muhammadan message destined to offer solutions to those contemporary conditions that existed in the days of the Prophet. They derived their understanding of their society from their cultural environment. Thus, they were normative for their own time and place. The Qur’anic message did not take into account the *Prime Sender, i.e., Allah* whose previous messages were intended for all mankind. The message of the Qur’an manifests no proper evolution and maturity, as we discovered in its teaching about *wife-beating*, which was the main subject of our study. We hope to pursue this course, endeavoring to apply our main thesis to the other problems that are mentioned in the Qur’an, such as in the social, economic, and intellectual areas of life.”

Analysis

The writer of this essay, aided by his acquaintance with linguistics and the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, endeavored to prove that the Qur’anic teaching allowing men to beat their wives does not manifest that level maturity that is expected from Allah’s final revelation, the Qur’an. Therefore, the message of the Qur’an is purely a localized discourse meant for the Prophet’s time and place.

Comments

The author of the essay seems to be well-versed in his knowledge of linguistics and fully at home in the teachings of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. His critique of the Qur’anic teachings regarding husband and wife relations echoes some of the contributions of ordinary young Muslims who send “letters to the editors” of their favorite online media.

His “revolutionary” and novel hermeneutics of the Qur’an is rather simple. He posits the gradual nature of Allah’s revelations, expecting them to mature as history progresses, enlightenment occurs, and circumstances and conditions for all people change and improve. He sees gradations in the types and severity of punishments of law-breakers portrayed in Old and New Testament times. This being so, he concludes that by the time the Qur’an appeared in history, and after Jesus’ life on earth, we would have expected its teachings to be more “mature,” i.e. more humane, comparable to the change that occurred between Old Testament revelation and New Testament revelation as exemplified in Jesus.

But is this thesis actually viable? Unfortunately, this is not the case. A plain reading of *Surat al-Nisa*’ makes it clear that it refers to the punishment of wives who are suspected of disregarding the wishes of their husbands. And the command of Allah is explicit. Wives are to be kept from the conjugal bed, and they are to be beaten!

According to *Marmaduke Pickthall’s* translation of this *Ayat*, the Arabic verb “*watadrubhunna*” is translated “*and scourge them.*” This is a very harsh word, especially when one considers that the translator was an Englishman who converted to Islam. It is interesting to note that *Yusuf Ali*, a Muslim-born translator, softened the Arabic original meaning by adding several parenthetical words. His translation of the

relevant phrase reads: *As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (Next), refuse to share their beds, (And last) beat them (lightly).*

There is no escape from concluding that this Qur'anic teaching is extremely detrimental to Muslim wives who must live in constant fear not knowing whether their husbands would ever decide to take the Qur'anic injunction seriously. It is not only when a wife knowingly misbehaves that she can expect harsh disciplinary action from her husband. Additionally, and probably more psychologically damaging, she has always to wonder how could she ever avoid even a *suspicion of disloyalty and ill-conduct?!*

The essay is no doubt more shocking to many a Muslim reader, because the author accords the older Scriptures of the Christians a better rating than the Qur'an as far as the humane treatment of women is concerned by quoting the words of Christ and Paul. It is indeed a serious matter when a Muslim grants any authority to the New Testament, a holy book which, according to Islamic teachings, has been seriously corrupted.

I was pleased to note that some of the readers who responded to the essay sided with the author in defense of the women of Islam. They applauded his taking their side. In fact one respondent opined that men should be treated the same way as women, when they misbehave! They should suffer the consequences of their breaking the Shariah.

Thanks to the Internet, we are becoming more aware of the stirrings within the Arab-Muslim world regarding the inequities toward women that are enshrined in the Qur'an. We cannot but salute anyone living within *Daru'l Islam* who actually does something in a public forum to elicit discussion about such inequities. And encomiums are due as well to the website *kwtanweer* in accepting the writer's interesting and thoughtful critique of Islam's sacred text which is believed to have existed in heaven from all eternity on tablets of gold!

For those readers who can read Arabic, you may read the essay by going to this [URL](#)

Translation of the relevant texts from Surat 4 of the Qur'an *An-Nisa'* (Women)

Marmaduke's Translation

34. Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. *As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them.* Lo! Allah is ever High, Exalted, Great.

35. And if ye fear a breach between them twain (the man and wife), appoint an arbiter

from his folk and an arbiter from her folk. If they desire amendment Allah will make them of one mind. Lo! Allah is ever Knower, Aware.

Yusuf Ali Translation

34. Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. ***As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (Next), refuse to share their beds, (And last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them Means (of annoyance): For Allah is Most High, great (above you all).***

35. If ye fear a breach between them twain, appoint (two) arbiters, one from his family, and the other from hers; if they wish for peace, Allah will cause their reconciliation: For Allah hath full knowledge, and is acquainted with all things.