

Chapter 11: The Etymological and Juristic Meaning of Worship [‘ibādah]

The term worship [‘ibādah] and its various derivatives have been employed in a lot of Qur’anic verses. It is for this reason that its meaning has to be well clarified.

Some people imagine that worship means a particular deed and action, like performing the ritual prayers or paying the *zakaat* or prostrating, but that is not the case. The term worship has to be studied in more detail.

The etymological meaning of worship [‘ibādah]

We will initially quote the etymological meaning of worship [‘ibādah] from wordbooks and thereafter quote Qur’anic verses to clarify its denotation.

Hereunder, we have cited quotations from the Book “*Al-Tahqiq fī Kalam al-Qur’an*”, written by Hasan Mustafawī, in which he recounts the opinions of a number of etymologists.

It has thus been written in “*Misbḥ al-Lughah*” of Qayyūmī, “Worship [‘ibādah] denotes submitting and yielding to Allah. Its subjective noun is worshipper [‘ābid], whose plurals are ‘ibād and ‘abad (worshippers).”

It has thus been written in “*Maqāṣ al-Lughah*”, “The word “‘abd’ (servant or adorer) denotes one who is submissive and obedient. A docile and obedient camel is called ‘mu‘abbad’ and an even road is also called ‘tarīq mu‘abbad’ (even path) because such a path has become even as a result of being traversed a lot and it has thus become submissive to travelers.”

The term worship [‘ibādah] in the Holy Qur’an

What can be gathered from the aforementioned wordbooks is that worship denotes obedience,

submission and docility, and the types of worship such as prostration, the ritual prayers and other than these are instances of submission, and that this denotation is compatible with the concept of prayer which we will deduce from Qur'anic verses.

Some people have interpreted worship [*ibādah*] as ultimate humility and the utmost level of submission, which is the same as prostration.

First verse:

“Did I not exhort you, O children of Adam, saying, ‘Do not worship Satan. He is indeed your manifest enemy. Worship Me. That is a straight path?’”²

In the book of exegesis “*Kishf*”, this verse has thus been explained, “Worshipping Satan means obeying and listening to his orders in affairs which tempt or seduce man.”

It can be inferred from this verse that worship means mere obedience, not utmost obedience. This verse also manifests this same meaning as: “O children of Adam! We exhorted you not to submit to Satan, but obey and yield to Me.”

Second verse:

“When the apostles came to them, before them and in their own time,³ saying, ‘Worship no one except Allah’, they said, ‘Had our Lord wished, He would certainly have sent down angels [to us]. We indeed disbelieve in what you have been sent with.’”⁴

Certainly, prophets (‘a) were not only charged with telling people to prostrate before Allah, but they used to invite them to a religion based on various laws, such as prayers, fasting, alms tax and the *jihad*. Of course, prostration [before Allah] is also one of the dictates [of religion]. In short, prophets (‘a) were charged with inviting people to the kernel of worship with respect to Allah in all affairs, not just ultimate humility. The following verse also denotes this:

“And mention [Hūd] the brother of ‘ūd, when he warned his people at Ahqūf—and warners have passed away before and after him—saying, ‘Do not worship anyone but Allah. Indeed, I fear for you the punishment of a tremendous day.’”⁵

Third verse:

“Say, ‘O people! If you are in doubt about my religion, then [know that] I do not worship those whom you worship besides Allah. Rather, I worship only Allah, who causes you to die, and I have been commanded to be among the faithful and that dedicate yourself to the religion, as a hanīf, and never be one of the polytheists.’”⁶

It has thus been written in “*Mufradāt Rāghib*”, “The term religion [*dīn*] has two meanings; one is

obedience, and the other is reward, but it has been borrowed to mean the whole set of Divine law. It is for this reason that obedience and submission is current in all Divine injunctions.

Fourth verse:

“Look! [Only] exclusive faith is worthy of Allah, and those who take guardians besides him [claiming,] ‘We only worship them so that they may bring us near to Allah.’ Allah will indeed judge between them concerning that about which they differ. Indeed, Allah does not guide someone who is a liar and an ingrate.”⁷

Fifth verse:

“And worship your Lord until certainty⁸ comes to you.”⁹

It has been asserted that ‘certainty’ in the above quoted verse means death; that is to say, worship Allah until the end of your life. Of course, it does not mean that be in a state of prostration until the end of your lives, but that be in a state of submission until the end of your lives.

For this reason, worship [*‘ibādah*] denotes submission and humility with respect to Allah and no other condition is involved.

Concordance between the meaning of supplication [*du‘ā*] and worship [*‘ibādah*]

In Qur’anic verses, the words worship and supplicate (or invocation) have been used synonymously. We assert that these two words have one and the same meaning. Worship [*‘ibādah*], as has been clarified, means submission, docility and obedience. Supplication or invocation [*du‘ā*] also means the same, and there are Qur’anic verses which prove this:

First verse:

“And they invoke none but females besides Him, and invoke none but a froward Satan.”¹⁰

“*Majma‘ al-Bayān*” asserts that ‘they invoke’ means ‘they worship’, that is to say, they worship none but idols and Satan. It ought not to be left unsaid that worshipping idols is the same as worshipping Satan because worshipping idols was done upon orders from Satan. It is clear that worshipping Satan means obeying him, and listening to his orders.

It has thus been written in “*Tafsīr al-Mizān*”, “The first ‘they invoke’ [in the above quoted verse] means worship and the second one denotes obedience, because polytheists used to ask idols to alleviate their needs.”¹¹

The assertion of “*Tafsīr al-Mūzīn*” that there is a difference between the two is, in my opinion, not correct, but that of “*Majma‘ al-Bayān*” that they both mean worship is correct, because worship means the same as obedience.

Second verse:

“Say, ‘O people! If you are in doubt about my religion, then [know that] I do not worship those whom you worship besides Allah. Rather, I worship only Allah, who causes you to die, and I have been commanded to be among the faithful, and that dedicate yourself to the religion, as a hanīf, and never be one of the polytheists. Nor invoke besides Allah that which neither benefits you nor can do you any harm; for if you do so, then you will indeed be among the wrongdoers.’”¹²

It becomes clear from the above quoted verse that the words ‘worship’ and ‘invoke’ are used synonymously; for instance, ‘*you worship besides Allah*’ and ‘*invoke besides Allah*’.

Third verse:

“Your Lord has said, ‘Call Me, and I will hear you!’ Indeed, those who are disdainful of My worship will enter Hell in utter humility.”¹³

Fourth verse:

“Say, ‘I have been forbidden to worship those whom you invoke besides Allah, since there have come to me manifest proofs from my Lord, and I have been commanded to submit to the Lord of all the worlds.’”¹⁴

Sincere worship

Worship which is acceptable to Allah is that which is purely for Him and is not contaminated by any kind of polytheism. Polytheists also used to worship Allah, but also used to worship idols besides Him, and it is for this very reason that their worship was not accepted.

Consider the following verses, which denote that worship ought to be purely for Allah:

“Set your heart [on Him] at every occasion of prayer, and invoke Him, putting your exclusive faith in Him.”¹⁵

“You [alone] do we worship.”¹⁶

The meaning of prostration [sajdah]

In order to understand the meaning of prostration [sajdah], it is better to first refer to Qur’anic verses.

“Have you not regarded that whatever thing Allah has created casts its shadow to the right and to the left, prostrating to Allah in utter humility? To Allah prostrates whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth, including animals and angels, and they are not arrogant.”¹⁷

It is clear that in the above quoted verse, prostration does not mean placing one’s forehead on the ground. In “*Kishf*”, it has been said that prostration means submission of all existents to Allah.

Evidently, this is the correct meaning of prostration, and placing one’s forehead on the ground is only one instance of prostration.

- [1.](#) Alms tax or tax on the accumulated property paid by a Muslim as a part of his religious obligations.
- [2.](#) Sūrat Yūn 36:60–61.
- [3.](#) That is, during the times of their forefathers and in their own time. Or ‘from their front and behind’, that is, from all sides.
- [4.](#) Sūrat Fussilat 41:14.
- [5.](#) Sūrat al-Ahqāf 46:21.
- [6.](#) Sūrat Yūnus 10:104–105.
- [7.](#) Sūrat al-Zumar 39:3.
- [8.](#) Or ‘death’.
- [9.](#) Sūrat al-Hijr 15:99.
- [10.](#) Sūrat al-Nisā’ 4:117.
- [11.](#) Tafsīr al-Mizān, exegesis of the above quoted verse.
- [12.](#) Sūrat Yūnus 10:104–106.
- [13.](#) Sūrat al-Ghāfir (or al-Mu’min) 40:60.
- [14.](#) Sūrat al-Ghāfir (or al-Mu’min) 40:66.
- [15.](#) Sūrat al-A’raf 7:29.
- [16.](#) Sūrat al-Fatihah 1:5.
- [17.](#) Sūrat al-Nahl 16:48–49.

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