

Lecture 10: Ghadeer in the Bible

The word ghadeer in the Bible appears as the Hebrew word for wall or fence. As such, it is generally proper to translate it. However, the wall or fence is often used in a most suggestive and even clearly symbolic way, and with only three or four exceptions seems highly significant to the events known as Al-Ghadeer in Islamic tradition.

The first occurrence of the word is in the story of Balaam, the ancient Persian prophet, in Numbers 22. This prophet was asked to curse the people of God, and instead of refusing to do so, he inquired of God whether he might do so or not, hoping that God would give him permission to take the reward offered for doing so. He set out against God's command, at which point Numbers 22:24 says "the angel of YHWH stood in a path of the vineyards, a wall (ghadeer) on this side, and a wall (ghadeer) on that side."

Balaam did not see the angel, but his donkey, in seeking to turn aside, crushed his foot against the wall. Since that occasion, ghadeer has been a symbol of the wall by which God reveals the right way, and the wall against which those who choose not to be rightly guided bruise their ankles. Another text using the word as a fence or wall to show the right path is Job 19:8.

The word is used again in reference to the descendants of Simeon, who destroyed the last of the Amelekites at the command of God. It says in 1 Chronicles 4:39,40 that "they went to the entrance of Gedor, even unto the east side of the valley, to seek pasture for their flocks. 40 And they found fat pasture and good, and the land was wide, and quiet, and peaceable; for they of Ham had dwelt there of old."

The Massoretic scribes have arbitrarily vocalized the word as Ghedor, but the word in the original text is precisely the same as that of Numbers 22. This passage suggests a further symbolism for the word Ghadeer. It is an unexpected source of well-being and felicity. Pasture for the flocks is already well-known in the Hebrew Scriptures in connection with divine guidance, as seen in the famous Psalm 23.

The word Ghadeer is vocalized as such in Ezra 9:9. "For we were bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof, and to give us a wall

in Judah and in Jerusalem.”

The building of a wall in this text has its literal sense, but the expressions, especially here, are heavily weighted with symbolism. This is intimated by the use of the expression “to give.”

The literal wall of Jerusalem was build with human hands, but the ghadeer itself was something given by God. What was given was a re-establishing of the center of faith and authority. It must be noted that the ghadeer in this situation was contested by the Samaritans. From an Islamic point of view, although in some aspects there is more in common with Samaritanism than Judaism, this ghadeer appears to be correct and justified.

The Samaritans did not accept some of the prophets mentioned in the Qur’an, whom the Jews of the time did accept. It was this ghadeer in Jerusalem and Judah that differentiated between the divinely established authority and the unacceptable authority of the Samaritans. There is thus a perfect parallel between the ghadeer of Ezra and that known from Islamic tradition. This text also mentions the Persian connection already noted in Numbers 22.

There are two prophetic passages of import in regard to the word ghadeer. The first is in the context of fasting in Isaiah 58:12. The relevant expression is “repairer of the breach.” The word is pointed as godeer, that is, a participle, thus meaning “the one who is fencing up the breach.” It might just as well be a construct of ghadeer, thus meaning “the fencing up of the breach.” In any case, it refers to a human figure.

Up to verse five, the prophet’s words apply to the people, who fail to serve God properly by fulfilling the forms of fasting but continue to act unjustly. The pronoun “you” changes to the singular in verse 7, after which the human figure of the ghadeer is described. These words apply most specifically to Imam Ali (as), who was appointed at Al-Ghadeer.

Isaiah 58:7 “Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? 8 Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy rereward.

9 Then shalt thou call, and the LORD shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity; 10 And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday:

11 And the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. 12 And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.”

The many expressions of this passage all fit the character and actions of Imam Ali very well. There are many narrations referring to the Imam (as) feeding the hungry. He also functioned to lift the burdens of the people, and dispelling backbiting and falsehood. But the text emphasizes the direct divine guidance that was given to the Imam.

The two passages in Ezekiel give quite a different message. They focus on the failure of Israel to fulfill their God-given role of leadership in propagating monotheism in the world. Ezekiel 13:5 “Ye have not gone up into the gaps, neither made up the hedge for the house of Israel to stand in the battle in the day of the LORD.”

This brings up the context of the need for the proclamation of Al-Ghadeer. Both Jews and Christians eventually failed to carry out the divine mandate. Therefore it was necessary to correct their failures through the revelation of the Qur’an, and the establishment of a “fence” or ghadeer to preserve divine law for the world. The text notes that the house of Israel will have to answer for the failure in the day of judgement.

This failure is even more clearly pinpointed in Ezekiel 22:30 “And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none.” The Imamate comes into its own specifically with Imam Ali at the proclamation of Al-Ghadeer.

Psalm 62 is one of the Imamic Psalms, having twelve verses. The word ghadeer appears in the third verse, the one in any series of twelve usually evoking the experiences of Imam Husayn (as). The entire Psalm deals with the issue of divine authority.

But verse 3 touches on the question of accepting, or in this case, not accepting the man established by God to represent His authority on earth. Psalm 62:3(4) “How long will ye imagine mischief against a man? ye shall be slain all of you: as a bowing wall shall ye be, and as a tottering fence.”

Here ghadeer is translated as “fence.” The word “ish” or “man” as used in the Psalms often has Imamic implications, as is clearly seen in Psalm 1:1. The implication is that those who should imagine mischief against “a man” or the Imam and who should kill him, will in the same way also be slain themselves. The Imam is equated directly here with the ghadeer or fence that indicates the right path.

This warning against those who break the covenant of ghadeer is repeated in Ecclesiastes 10:8 “He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him.” The prophet promises that whoever breaks ghadeer will be bitten by a serpent. The preceding reference to a pit of course primarily means the setting of a trap for another. However, the whole verse has an eschatological tone, suggesting either punishment in the grave for failure to recognize the Imam or punishment in the judgement.

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