

Suratul Baqarah: Verse 188

(١٨٨) وَلَا تَأْكُلُوا أَمْوَالَكُم بَيْنَكُم بِالْبَاطِلِ وَتُدْلُوا بِهَا إِلَى الْحُكَّامِ لِتَأْكُلُوا فَرِيقًا مِّنْ أَمْوَالِ النَّاسِ بِالْإِثْمِ وَأَنتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ

And do not swallow up your property among yourselves by wrongful means; neither seek to gain access thereby to the authorities, so that you may swallow up a portion of the property of men wrongfully while you know (2:188)

Commentary

Qur'an: And do not swallow up your property among yourselves by wrongful means.

Akl (to eat, to swallow up, **الاكل**) metaphorically means 'to take hold of, or to make use of.'

The reason of this metaphorical use is that eating is the most common and the earliest natural desire; as soon as his life begins, man feels the need of food and then gradually proceeds to other needs like clothing, habitation and marriage, etc.

Acquiring food is his first natural action and wilful doing. That is why if one uses or takes a thing it is said one has eaten it, and especially so in the case of wealth and property. And this figure of speech is common to all languages.

Mal (wealth, property, **المال**) literally means the possession which is desired. It seems that its root is *mayl* (inclination, desire, bent, **الميل**), because it is one of those things to which the heart is inclined, which it desires.

Baynakum (among yourselves, **بينكم** *bayn* **بين**) means the gap between two or more things.

Wrong (*batil*, **الباطل**) is opposite of truth (*haqq*, **الحق**): *haqq* (**الحق**) means a thing which is confirmed.

The proviso ***among yourselves*** added after the command ***do not swallow up your property*** shows

that wealth is for all the people; but Allah has distributed it among them — a just distribution — by promulgating laws based on justice and equity, which cut at the roots of corruption and immorality.

If anybody trespasses the limits put by these laws, it will be invalid and wrong. This verse, in a way, explains the verse:

He it is who created for you all that is in the earth (2:29).

Your property (*amwalakum*, أموالكم): History and ancient tradition show that ever since man put his foot on this globe, society has recognised the right to property and upheld it in one way or other. By using this possessive pronoun, Allah confirms this right.

This principle has been mentioned in the Qur'an in more than a hundred places, in various words like dominion (*mulk*, الملك), property (*mal*, المال), the preposition for (ل... , ل) used for possession, and *istikhlaf* (to make man Allah's deputy on earth, الاستخلاف); but there is no need to quote the references here.

Likewise all the verses which regulate selling, trade and other commercial dealings implicitly recognise this right. For example:

and Allah has allowed trading (2:275),

do not swallow up your property among yourselves by wrongful means, except that it be trading by your mutual consent (4:29),

and the trade dullness of which you fear (9:25)

and other such references, and *mutawatir* traditions support it.

Qur'an: neither seek to gain access thereby to the authorities, so that you may swallow up a portion of the property of man wrongfully while you know.

Idla' (translated here as “to gain access”, الادلاء) literally means to send the bucket (*dal'*, الدلوء) down into the well for drawing water. Its metaphorical use in this verse implies offering money, etc., to the authorities to induce them to give judgement in favour of the bribe-giver.

It is a very nice allegory. The desired judgement is the water in the depth of the well; the bribe is the bucket which is sent down to bring the desired result.

A portion (*fariqan*, فريقا): It is a part separated from the whole.

This sentence is in conjunction with the word *swallow up*; therefore, grammatically it is a prohibitory verb, and hence the sign of quiescence.

Another possibility: The “and” (و ..., و) (the conjunction word not appearing in the above translation) may be taken to mean “with” (مع, مع), and further it may be presumed that after it, the word that (inna, ان) is implied.

In this case the whole verse will be one sentence and will mean: “.....by wrongful means with seeking to gain access...”

Thus, the verse prohibits the mutual understanding between the bribe-giver and bribe-taker so that they wrongfully swallow up the property of the people by sharing it between themselves — the bribe-taker taking the portion which has been offered to him, and the giver usurping the other portion — while they know that it is wrong and unjust.

Traditions

In a tradition, as-Sadiq (a.s.) says about this verse: “The Arabs used to gamble with their wives and property. So, Allah prohibited them to do so.” [*al-Kafi*]

Abū Basir says: “I asked Abū ‘Abdillah (a.s.) the meaning of the words of Allah in His book:

and do not swallow up your property among yourselves by wrongful means; neither seek to gain access thereby to the authorities.

He (the Imam) said: ‘O Abū Basir! Verily Allah knew that there would be in this *ummah* judges who would do injustice. Verily, He did not mean (here) judges of a just authority, but He meant those of an unjust authority.

O Abū Muhammad! (i.e. Abū Basir) if you had a right against someone and you summoned him to the judges of a just authority, but he did not agree to it and compelled you to put your case before the judges of an unjust authority, so that they might decide in his favour, then that man would be among those who had resorted to the judgement of the *taghūt* (Satan). And it is the word of Allah:

Have you not observed those who think that they believe in what has been sent down unto you and what was sent down before you? They intend to resort to the judgement of taghūt (Satan), though they were commanded to deny (reject) him ... (4:60)’ ” [*ibid.*]

There is a tradition from Abū Ja‘far (a.s.): “The meaning of ‘wrongful means’ is the false oath with which property is usurped.” [*Majma‘u ‘l-bayan*]

The author says: All the above traditions give some examples, but the verse is general.

On Social Science

All organic things, vegetable, animal and human beings make use of other things to sustain their lives. They actively take advantage of those surrounding things which may help in their continued existence.

We have never heard of a thing which exists but is not active, or an action which is done without the doer expecting its benefit to return to him.

Remark the vegetable kingdom which does whatever it does with the single aim of benefiting from it in its existence, growth, and reproduction.

Similarly, all animals and human beings do whatever they do with the aim of getting benefit one way or another, even if that benefit be only in the imagination and thought.

Plants have been taught by the Creator, and animals and men know by their instinct that they cannot use any material for the fulfilment of their natural needs and the protection of their existence unless that material has a very special relation to them; in other words, unless it belongs to them.

They know that one deed cannot be done by two doers. Accordingly, man and animal etc. prohibit others from interfering in their affairs and do not allow anything to utilize what they want to utilize for themselves.

This is the foundation of this special relation – namely, possession which is recognised by one and all. Hence the words ‘my’, ‘your’, etc.

For a further proof, look at any animal fighting to remove others from its territory, its prey, or its mate. Again, see children quarrelling for, and defending, whatever food, or toy, they have got.

Even a suckling infant does not allow another infant to suck at the same breast. This is the lesson taught by nature.

When man, being a social animal, established society, that natural instinct was bound to become more pronounced, and eventually became a well-organised and well-balanced system that took the shape of social ethics and moral values; gradually the basic concept of that special relation branched off into various kinds with different names: the monetary relation was named ‘property’, the nonmonetary, ‘right’ and so on.

Human beings may have different views on the legality of various means of acquiring property, like inheritance, trade, confiscation by the ruling authority, etc., or on the suitability of the owner, whether he is adult or minor, sane or idiot, a single person or a group, and so on.

But there is no escape from recognising the basic principle of ownership. That is why even those who apparently reject the idea of ownership have only transferred it from the individual to the society or the

state.

Even then, they have not been able to abolish private ownership totally, and they will never be able to do so, because it is the verdict of nature, and if nature is rejected, man will perish.

We shall discuss, God willing, in their proper places the details of this basic principle, according to the means of its acquirement, such as trade, profit, inheritance, war–booty, collection, etc. and according to the status of the owner, i.e. adult or minor, etc.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/al-mizan-exegesis-quran-volume-3-sayyid-muhammad-husayn-tabatabai/suratul-baqarah-verse-188>