

Suratul Baqarah: Verse 189

(١٨٩) يَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الْأَهْلَةِ ۚ قُلْ هِيَ مَوَاقِيتُ لِلنَّاسِ وَالْحَجِّ ۚ وَلَيْسَ الْبِرُّ بِأَنْ تَأْتُوا الْبُيُوتَ مِنْ ظُهُورِهَا وَلَكِنَّ الْبِرَّ مَنِ اتَّقَى ۚ وَأْتُوا الْبُيُوتَ مِنْ أَبْوَابِهَا ۚ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ

They ask you concerning the new moons. Say, they are (indications of) times fixed for men and (for) the pilgrimage. And it is not righteousness that you should enter the houses from their backs; but righteousness is the one who guards himself (against evil); and enter the houses by their doors and fear Allah, so that you may be successful (2: 189).

Commentary

Qur'an: They ask you ... the pilgrimage.

Ahillah (الأهله) is plural of *hilal* (crescent, الهلال). The moon is called *hilal* (الهلال) at the beginning of the lunar month when it comes away from the direct rays of the sun; it is named crescent (*hilal*, الهلال) on the first and second nights according to one group, while some others say that it is named so for the first three nights; still others say that this name continues until a faint circle of light shows the outline of the moon.

A fourth group says that is a “crescent” until its light brightens the night; this occurs on the seventh night, after which it is simply called moon (*qamar*, القمر) and on the fourteenth night it becomes full moon (*badr*, البدر). Its general name in Arabic is *zibriqan* (الزبرقان).

The Arabs say *istahalla's-sabiyy* (استهل الصبي) when the newly born child cries soon after birth. Also they say *ahalla'l-qawmu bi'l-hajj* (اهل القوم بالحج) when the pilgrims call out loudly *labbayk Allahumma labbayk*.

Thus the root *H-L-L* (هلال) gives the idea of raising one's voice, and the new moon is called *hilal* (الهلال) because people hail it and raise their voice to point it out.

Mawaqit (المواقيت) is plural of *miqat* (الميقات) which means the time appointed for a work. It also means the place appointed for it, as we say: The *miqat* of the Syrians or the Yemenes, which means the place where they wear the robes of *ihram* for pilgrimage. In this verse it has the first meaning, i.e. the appointed time.

They ask you concerning the new moons. It does not say what the question was. Some say that they wanted to know the reality of the moon and why it appeared in different shapes from night to night.

Others think that they wished to know the reason for the reappearance of the new moon after its disappearing at the end of the month.

But the word used is *ahillah* (new moons, الأُمَّلَّة) in the plural, and it proves that the question was not about the reality of the moon or its various phases, because in that case it would have been appropriate to say “they ask you concerning the moon” not “the new moons”.

And if the question was about the reason of the new moon, the proper words would be “they ask you concerning the new moon”. In both cases the use of the plural would be inappropriate.

This plural “new moons” proves that the question was: What is the reason or benefit of the appearance of the moon as crescent after crescent and of its marking the lunar months?

This question was shortened into “new moons” because it is the new moon which starts a new month, and then its benefit was explained.

This question may be inferred from the reply: ***say they are (indications of) times fixed for men and (for) pilgrimage.*** The times fixed for various actions and activities are the ‘months’, and not the various shapes of the moon but about the lunar months which are marked by the new moons.

And Allah explained that these months were the times fixed for the benefit of man in affairs of their material and spiritual lives. Man, by his nature, is obliged to measure all his activities by time.

It was, therefore, necessary to divide time (which is the yard-stick of his actions) into various short and long portions. The mercy of Allah which looks after the affairs of His creatures, and guides them towards the betterment of their lives, effected this division by creating night, day, month, season and year etc.

The most obvious and the clearest division is the grouping of the days in the lunar months. Everyone may benefit from it, be he a scholar or an ignorant person, a bedouin or a city-dweller; everyone can observe the beginning of the new moon if his eye-sight is correct; and everyone may easily keep its count.

These benefits are conspicuously absent in the solar calendar; man did not wake to this idea, and could not come to grips with its complicated reckoning, until many centuries after human society came into being. Moreover, not every one can always know the dates of the solar calendar.

Therefore, the lunar months are the times fixed and prescribed for men for their use in their material and spiritual affairs, and especially so for the *hajj* (pilgrimage) because it is performed in the known months.

The *hajj* (pilgrimage) has especially been mentioned here as an introduction to the topic which is dealt with in the following sentences.

Qur'an: *And it is not righteousness ... by their doors.*

It is known from the reports that in the days before Islam it was the custom of some Arabs that after wearing the robes of *ihram* for pilgrimage, if they had to enter their houses for any reason, they did not use the doors, but cut a hole in the wall for that purpose.

Islam disapproved that practice and told them to enter the houses from their doors. The verse has been revealed in a way that the above-mentioned report may be believed to be true.

Had there been no such reliable report, these words could be interpreted metaphorically as a prohibition of performing religious rites in any way other than the prescribed one.

For example, pilgrimage should not be done but in its prescribed months, fast should not be kept in any month other than Ramadhan, and so on. In that case, the sentence would have been complementary to the previous one.

The meaning would have been: these months are the times prescribed for the religious deeds fixed for them, and it is not permitted to transfer those deeds to other months, like doing *hajj* (pilgrimage) outside the prescribed months or fasting in a month other than Ramadhan.

But the first interpretation is supported by the traditions. The words, ***it is not righteousness to enter the houses from their backs***, proves that this practice was never approved of by the religion; otherwise it would not have been said to be against righteousness.

It was just a bad custom of the pre-Islamic times; and Allah said that it was not righteousness. Rather, righteousness was the fear of Allah and guarding oneself against evil.

but righteousness is the one who guards himself (against evil): Apparently, the sentence should have been “but righteousness is guarding oneself (against evil)”, but Allah used the expression ***the one who guards himself*** to show that the real virtue is in practicing “piety”, and not in its abstract idea.

It is like the verse:

It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards the east and the west but righteousness is the one who believes in Allah ... (2:177)

and enter the houses by their doors: It is not a compulsory order; it is a guidance that entering into houses from their doors is the proper method, as it is the usual and recognised way.

People build houses and put doors in them for this very purpose, and there is no reason why a hole should be drilled for entering into, or going out of, the house.

This sentence admonishes them not to follow a foolish custom which goes against common sense. In short, the sentence does not say that it is obligatory on every one to enter into a house through the door.

It just tells them that it is the proper way. Of course, if one enters into a house by a way other than the door, thinking that this custom is a part of religion, then it will be an “unlawful innovation”.

Qur'an: and fear Allah, so that you may be successful. It was mentioned in the beginning of this *sūrah* (chapter) that *taqwa* (piety) is virtue which gathers in its fold all ranks of the faith and all stages of perfection.

Obviously, not every stage and rank leads one to spiritual success and happiness, as do the last stages which remove all shades of polytheism and misdirection.

It is these last stages which guide one to success and bring the good tidings of happiness. That is why Allah said, **so that you may be successful**, using the word ‘may’.

Also, it is possible to interpret the words, “fear Allah”, here as following this particular order, and discarding the practice of going into houses from their backs.

Traditions

Ibn Jarir and Ibn Abi Hatim have narrated from Ibn ‘Abbas that he said: “The people asked the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.a.) concerning the new moons.

Then this verse was revealed, **They ask you concerning the new moons. Say, they are (indications of) times fixed for men**; they know from them the time their loans are due, the waiting period (number of months a women must wait after divorce or the death of her husband before the next marriage) of their women and the time of their pilgrimage.” [*ad-Durru ’l-manthūrah*]

Some others from different chains are from Abu ‘1-‘Aliyah, Qatadah and others.

There is another tradition that someone asked the Prophet about the various phases of the moon; so this verse was sent down. But we have already commented on this report that it is against the apparent meaning of the verse, and, therefore, is not worthy of consideration.

There is a tradition reported by Waki‘, al-Bukhari and Ibn Jarir from al-Bara‘. In the days of “ignorance”, when they wore the *ihram*, they used to go into the house from its back. Therefore, Allah sent down the verse

And it is not righteousness that you should enter the houses from their backs; but righteousness

is the one who guards himself (against evil); and enter the houses by their doors. [ad-Durru 'l-manthar]

There is another tradition reported by Ibn Abi Hatim and al-Hakim (and he has said that it is “correct”) from Jabir. He said: “The Quraysh were called *hums* (enthusiastic, strenuous, الحمس), and they used to enter by the doors in the condition of *ihram*.

The *ansar* (helpers) and other Arabs did not enter from the door in *ihram*. Once the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.a.) was in a garden, and came out from its door, and Qutbah ibn ‘Amir al-Ansari came out with him.

The people said, ‘O Messenger of Allah! Verily Qutbah ibn ‘Amir is a sinner, he came out with you from the door.’ The Prophet asked him: ‘Why did you do so?’

He replied: ‘I saw you doing it, so I did as you did.’ The Prophet said: ‘I am an *ahmas* (i.e. Qurayshite).’ He said: ‘But my religion is your religion.’ Then Allah sent down:

it is not righteousness that you should enter the houses from their backs. [ibid.]

The author says: Other traditions of nearly the same meaning have been narrated from other chains. *Hums* (الحمس) is the plural of *ahmas* (الاحمس) from *himasah* (الحماسة) which means “hardiness”.

The tribe of Quraysh was called *hums* (الحمس) because of their zeal in the matter of their religion, or because of their bravery and strength.

Apparently, this tradition shows that the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.a.) had allowed the continuation of that custom by non-Qurayshites before this incident; and that is why he admonished him in these words: “Why did you do so?”

If we accept this view then this verse was revealed to abrogate a rule which was enforced not by a verse but by the order of the Prophet. But you already know that the verse does not support this view.

It says, ***it is not righteousness that you should enter*** ... It is unimaginable that Allah or His Apostle on divine command enforced a rule and then Allah at the time of its abrogation condemned and criticised it as being against righteousness.

al-Baqir (a.s.) said about the word of Allah, *and enter the houses by their doors*: “Allah means that every affair, whatever it may be, should be approached in its (proper) way”. [al-Mahasin]

as-Sadiq (a.s.) said: “The Imams (*al-awsiya*) are the doors of Allah, from which Allah is approached; and had they not been there, Allah would not have been known; and it is through them that Allah has established His proof over His creatures.” [al-Kafi]

The author says: This tradition gives an example of the general meaning of this verse, which has been

explained in the previous one. There is no doubt that the verse is general in its meaning, even if it was sent down on a particular occasion.

The Imam said: “had they not been there, Allah would not have been known”. This refers to the true explanation of religion and the complete Call (Mission of the Prophet) which are with them.

This sentence has a deeper meaning also; maybe we shall explain it later on. There are numerous traditions of the same meaning as given in these two.

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