

Suratul Baqarah: Verse 215

(۲۱۵) يَسْأَلُونَكَ مَاذَا يُنْفِقُونَ ﴿۲۱۵﴾ قُلْ مَا أَنْفَقْتُمْ مِنْ خَيْرٍ فَلِلَّوَالِدِينَ وَالْأَقْرَبِينَ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسَاكِينِ وَابْنِ السَّبِيلِ ﴿۲۱۶﴾ وَمَا تَفْعَلُوا مِنْ خَيْرٍ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ بِهِ عَلِيمٌ

They ask you as to what they should spend. Say: Whatever of good you spend, it is for the parents, and the near of kin, and the orphans, and the poor, and the wayfarer; and whatever of good you do Allah surely knows it. (2:215)

Commentary

Qur'an: They ask you as to what they should spend. Say: Whatever of good you spend ...

The scholars say that the style of this verse is one of philosophy. The questioners had asked about what they should spend. But that question was foolish, because one does not need divine revelation to know that what is spent is wealth in all its various shapes.

Rather, they should have asked: Whom the wealth should be spent for. Therefore, Allah mentioned, instead, the deserving beneficiaries, which the questioners should have asked in the first place.

It is good reasoning; but those scholars have left out one important point. Even though the verse did not reply to their question directly, it has touched on it, and has hinted at the reply in two places:

Whatever of good you spend and whatever of good you do.

The verse, therefore, shows that the thing to be spent is wealth, irrespective of its shape and quantity; and that spending it on worthy beneficiaries is a good deed and Allah knows it very well; then it makes them aware that they should rather have asked the names of the beneficiaries, and guides them in this respect by giving the list: the parents, the near relatives, the orphans, the poor and the way-farer.

One finds in the commentaries of the Qur'an some strange explanations of this verse:

One of them says: “what” (*ma*, ما) in ***what they should spend*** was not used by the questioners to enquire about the quiddity and essence of the thing which should be spent, because it is from the terminology of logic, and is not worthy of any literary speech of eloquent style, let alone the Qur’an which is the purest of the Arabic literature.

Rather the word “what” was used for “how”; they wanted to know how they should spend their wealth and on whom. Accordingly, the verse answered that question.

The reply, therefore, is according to the question, and the reasoning of the scholars of eloquence (given earlier) is out of place.

Someone else went a step further. He said: It is true that “what” is used to ask about the essence; even then, the questioners’ aim was to ask as to “how” they should spend.

It was known that “what” is spent is wealth. As this was well-known, there was no risk of their being misunderstood; the hearer was bound to understand that they wanted to ask about “how”. It is like the verse:

they said: “Call on your Lord for our sake to make it plain to us what she is, for surely to us all the cows are alike ... ” (2:70)

They knew that the cow is an animal having such shape and such characteristics. Therefore, the words ***what she is*** could not be taken to mean that they wanted to know its quiddity — its genus and species.

The only possible meaning, thus, was that they wanted to know the particulars of that cow so that they might distinguish it from the others. That is why they were given the reply,

He (Musa) said: “He (Allah) says, surely she is a cow not made submissive that she should plough the land ... ” (2:71)

Both the commentators seem confused. It is true that *ma* (what, ما) is not used in language to ask about the quiddity of a thing, according to the terminology of logic — for a definition made up of the nearest genus and species.

But it does not mean that it is made for the question about “how”. It would be a linguistic mistake for the one who wants to ask, “for whom should I spend?” to say “what should I spend?”

Ma (what, ما) is made so as to ask for the factors which might distinguish one thing from others. The reply may be given by a logical definition using the nearest genus and species, or by describing such other distinctive characteristics and qualities by which that thing may easily be recognised.

The word “what” is, therefore, general and includes the logical term, but is not different from it. And certainly it is not made to ask “how”. The question about the cow and its reply (2:70—71) was asked

and given correctly according to the language.

There was no deviation in either from the real meaning of “what” — the question was about distinguishing factors of a thing.

A third one said: As the quiddity and essence was well-known, there was no alternative but to divert the word “what” to mean “how”.

It is a manifest error. That the answer is well-known, is no justification for changing the meaning of a word to mean something quite different.

There is one more strange explanation: The questioners had asked both questions — what should they spend, and where. The Qur’an mentioned only the first question and omitted the second, because the reply pointed to it. What nonsense!

Now, we come back to the verse. There is no doubt that there is here a diversion, in the main reply, from the asked question, to remind the people that the question worthy of asking was “where”, not “what”, they should spend, because it was no secret that spending is done from wealth and riches.

We find in the Qur’an that it often diverts its speech from one meaning to another, to point out that the new topic is more worthy of attention. It is a style of beauty which is difficult to find in other books. See for example:

And the parable of those who disbelieve is the parable of one who shouts to that which hears not but a call and a cry ... (2:17)

(Here the parable has been diverted to a satire against the idols.)

The likeness of what they spend in the life of this world is as the likeness of a wind in which is intense cold, (that) smote upon the tillage of a people who had done injustice to their souls, and destroyed it. (3:117)

(The parable is diverted from the wealth spent to its ultimate forfeiture.)

The parable of those who spend their wealth in the way of Allah is as the parable of a grain growing seven ears, in every ear there are a hundred grains; and Allah multiplies for whom He pleases; ... (2:261)

(The parable is diverted from those who spend in the way of Allah to the manifold increase in its reward.)

The day on which neither property will avail nor sons, except him who comes to Allah with a heart free (from evil). (26:88—89)

(Instead of praising the heart, free from evil, the believer is praised who has got that heart, to show the

importance of the believer.)

Say: I do not ask you aught of recompense for it, except that he who will, may take the way to his Lord. (25:57)

Glory be to Allah (for freedom) from what they describe, except the servants of Allah, the purified ones. (37: 159— 160)

There are many such verses.

Qur'an: and whatever of good you do, Allah surely knows it:

The word spending has been changed here to “doing good”; likewise, in the beginning of the verse “wealth” was changed to “good” (“whatever of good you spend”).

This change guides us to two principles:

First: It is very much recommended that one should spend one's wealth on the recognised beneficiaries — it does not matter whether the amount is small or large.

But what matters is that the thing spent should be “good”, desirable and likeable. Allah says:

Never shall you attain to righteousness until you spend (benevolently) out of what you love (3:91);

O you who believe! Spend (benevolently) out of the good things that you have earned and what We have brought forth for you out of the earth; and do not aim at what is bad that you may spend of it (in charity) while you would not take it yourselves unless you connive at it ... (2:267)

Second: The spending should not be in a bad manner. The spending should be without reminding the receiver reproachfully of it or injuring his feelings. Allah says:

... then do not follow up what they have spent with obligation (reproach) or injury ... (2:262);

And they ask you as to what they should spend. Say: Whatever can be spared ... (2:219)

Traditions

There is a saying of Ibn 'Abbas that he said: “I did not see any people better than the companions of Muhammad. They did not ask him except thirteen questions till he was taken away (from this world), all of those (questions) are in the Qur'an.

Among them are: ‘They ask you about the intoxicants and games of chance’; ‘They ask you about the sacred month’; ‘They ask you about the orphans’; ‘They ask you about the menses’; ‘They ask you about

the booty'; 'They ask you as to what they should spend'.

They never asked but what was of (practical) to them." [ad-Durru'l-manthar]

It is written in *Majma'u'l-bayan* that this verse was revealed about 'Amr ibn al-Jamh; he was a very old man of great wealth. He said: "O Messenger of Allah! What should I give in charity and to whom?" Then Allah revealed this verse.

The author says: This tradition has also been narrated in *ad-Durru'l-manthar* through Ibn al-Mundhir from Ibn Hayyan. But the scholars have said that this tradition is weak.

Apart from the weakness in the chain of narrators, it is not in conformity with the verse, because the verse mentions only one question as to what should be spent, and not on whom.

Similarly, two other traditions reported in that book do not conform with the verse. The first is narrated through Ibn Jarir and Ibn al-Mundhir from Ibn Jarir that he said: "The believers asked the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.a.) where they should put (i.e. spend) their wealth.

So, the verse was revealed:

They ask you as to what they should spend. Say: 'Whatever of good you spend ...'

This, then, is voluntary (non-obligatory) expenditure; and *zakat* is different from all of it."

The second one is narrated from as-Suddi that he said: The day when this verse was revealed, there was no *zakat*. It is (about) the spending what one does on one's family and the alms one gives away. Then (the law of) *zakat* abrogated it.

The author says: It is clear that the relation between the verse of *zakat*

(Take alms out of their wealth — 9:103)

and this verse is not of abrogation at all. Or does the word "abrogation" mean something else in their language?

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