

Suratul Baqarah: Verse 221

(۲۲۱) وَلَا تَنْكِحُوا الْمُشْرِكَاتِ حَتَّى يُؤْمِنَ ۚ وَلَا تَنْكِحُوا الْمُشْرِكِينَ حَتَّى يُؤْمِنُوا ۚ وَلَعَبْدٌ مُؤْمِنٌ خَيْرٌ مِّنْ مُّشْرِكٍ ۚ وَلَوْ أَعْجَبَكُمْ ۚ أُولَٰئِكَ يَدْعُونَ إِلَى النَّارِ ۚ وَاللَّهُ يَدْعُو إِلَى الْجَنَّةِ وَالْمَغْفِرَةِ بِإِذْنِهِ ۚ وَيُبَيِّنُ آيَاتِهِ لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ

And do not marry the idolatresses until they believe; and certainly a believing bondswoman is better than an idolatress, even though she should allure you; and do not give (believing women) in marriage to idolaters until they believe; and certainly a believing bondsman is better than an idolater, even though he should allure you; those invite to the fire, and Allah invites to the garden and to forgiveness by His leave; and makes clear His signs for men, so that they may be mindful.
(221)

Commentary

Qur'an: *And do not marry the idolatresses until they believe:*

ar-Raghib has said in *al-Mufradat*: The original meaning of *nikah* (النكاح) is 'aqd (the marriage-tie, العقد) then it was metaphorically used for sexual intercourse.

It is impossible that it could be the other way round, because all the words denoting sexual intercourse are but metaphors; they thought it indecent to mention it, just as they disliked to declare the act itself.

It is not possible, for one who does not intend to utter an obscenity, to use the name of an unmentionable act for a decent thing like marriage.

This observation of ar-Raghib is very good; but for this reasoning to be valid, the word 'aqd (العقد) should be taken to mean the marriage-tie, not the formulae of the proposal and acceptance of marriage.

The *mushrikat* (idolatresses, المشركات) is the *ismu 'l-fa'il* (active participle, i.e. the noun derived from an infinitive verb denoting its doer, اسم الفاعل) of the verb *ishrak* (الاشراك) which means “to ascribe a partner

to Allah”; it is also called polytheism.

It is well-known that polytheism may be open or hidden, and these two qualities may be of various degrees and grades. The same is the case with belief and disbelief.

The most open kind of polytheism is to believe that there is more than one god and to take and worship idols and treat them as intercessors before God.

Less open is the polytheism of the people of the book, as they deny the prophethood of Muhammad (s.a.w.a.), and, especially their belief that ‘Uzayr was the son of God, or ‘Isa was the son of God, and so is their claim that they themselves are sons of God, and His beloved.

All this is polytheism, but less manifest than that of the idolaters. More hidden than that is believing that apparent causes independently create their effects; and then relying on these causes.

The most hidden polytheism is the one from which only the chosen servants of Allah, with pure hearts, can escape. And that is to be forgetful of Allah and to divert attention to other than Him.

But there is an important point which must be cleared here. Attributing a verb, adjective or active participle (in its literal sense) to someone is one thing; but using that adjective or active participle as a nomenclature is an entirely different matter.

If a believer neglected an obligatory act, it might be said that he denied it or disbelieved in it; but the nomenclature, unbeliever/disbeliever, cannot be used for him. Allah says:

and for the sake of Allah, pilgrimage to the House is incumbent upon men (upon) everyone who can afford the journey to it; and whoever disbelieves, then surely Allah is Self-sufficient, independent of the worlds. (3:97)

Here the verb, “disbelieves”, has been used for him who neglects the pilgrimage, still he is not called an “unbeliever”, he is a sinner; and if the adjective “unbeliever” or “disbeliever” is used for him at all, it must be conditional, e.g. “disbeliever in pilgrimage”.

The same is the case with all active participles and adjectives used in the Qur’an, like righteous, thankful, purified; and like sinner, unjust, etc. These terms cannot be used as a nomenclature in every place where the verb, adjective or active participle is used.

Accordingly, we cannot use the nomenclature, polytheist, for all those who indulge in hidden or open polytheism. “Idolater” or “polytheist” is a Qur’anic terminology and we should look at the Qur’an to know who is called a polytheist.

The Qur’an does not use this term for the Jews or the Christians. Instead it invented for them a new term, “people of the book”. And the term “disbeliever” (*kafir*, الكافر) is general, covering all those who

are outside the pale of Islam.

So far as the term, polytheist or idolater, is concerned, the Qur'an uses it in a context where it is known that the disbelievers, other than the people of the book, are meant. See, for example, the following verse:

Those who disbelieved from among the people of the book and the polytheists could not have separated themselves (from the faithful) until there had come to them the clear evidence (98: 1);

... the idolaters are nothing but unclean, so they shall not approach the Sacred Mosque after this year ... (9:28);

then slay the idolaters wherever you find them (9:5);

How can there be an agreement for the idolaters with Allah and with His Apostle? (9:7);

... and fight the polytheists all together as they fight you all together ... (9:36)

etc.

Now we come to the verse: And they said: Be Jews or Christians, you will be rightly guided. Say: Nay! (We follow) the religion of Ibrahim, the upright one, and he was not one of the polytheists.

(2:135) The last sentence, "he was not one of the polytheists", is not an innuendo against the Jews and the Christians. To know its meaning, let us look at another verse: Ibrahim was not a Jew, nor a Christian; but he was an upright (man), a Muslim, and he was not one of the polytheists.

(3:67). The word "upright (man)" is an adverse allusion to the Jews and the Christians; it exalts Ibrahim above the soulless ritualism of the Jews as well as the dogmatism of the Christians, the materialism of the one and the misguided spiritualism of the other.

It says that Ibrahim was on the middle path, neither a Jew nor a Christian. And then it uses the word "a Muslim", and shows that he was purely a Muslim, not ascribing any partner, associate or colleague to Allah; and then it adversely alludes to the polytheists by the words, "he was not one of the polytheists."

Likewise, in verse 2:135, the word "the upright one" indirectly hints against the Jews and the Christians who had gone astray; and the sentence, "and he was not one of the polytheists" alludes to the idol-worshippers.

In short, this verse does not refer to the Jews and the Christians as polytheists.

Now we come to some verses where the active participle, polytheist (*mushrik*, المشرك) has been used for other than idol-worshippers: –

And most of them do not believe in Allah without associating other (with Him). (12:106)

... and woe to the polytheists who do not give zakat, and they are unbelievers in the hereafter. (41:6–7)

His (Satan's) power is only over those who befriend him and those who associate others with Him (Allah). (16:100)

These verses have used the active participle, “polytheists”, for those who, for example, befriend Satan and are under his power.

Obviously, almost all the believers (except an infinitesimal minority who are friends of Allah, and are His truly righteous servants) would come under this definition.

But we would not be justified in giving them the name, “polytheists” because the active participle and the nomenclature are two different things.

This lengthy explanation shows that the apparent meaning of the verse under discussion prohibits marriage with idol-worshipping men and women only; marriage with the people of the book is not included in this verse.

In this context, there are no grounds at all for saying that this verse abrogated verse 6 of the chapter of *al-Ma'idah*; This day have been made lawful for you (all) good things; and the food of those who were given the book is lawful to you and your food lawful for them; and the chaste (ones) from the believing women and the chaste (ones) from those who were given the book before you (are lawful for you) when you have given them their wage (dower) with chaste intention, not fornicating nor taking them for paramours in secret ... (5:6) Nor is there any reason for saying that this verse (2:221) joined with the verse,

... and hold not to the ties of marriage of unbelieving women ... (60:10),

abrogates verse 5:6. Nor is it correct to say that the verse 5:6 has abrogated the two verses, 2:221 and 60:10.

Why are the above opinions wrong?

It is because:

First: As explained above, the verse under discussion apparently says nothing about marriage with the people of the book, while the verse of the chapter of *al-Ma'idah* (5:6) is concerned only with marriage with the people of the book.

As the subject matters of the two verses are totally different, there is no question of one of them abrogating the other.

So far as verse 60:10 *is* concerned, it speaks about not holding ties of marriage with unbelieving women, and at the first glance it appears contradictory to verse 5:6 which allows marriage with chaste women of the people of the book.

But a little more thinking will show (as will be explained later on) that this speaks about a man who accepts Islam and his wife remains a disbeliever, then he is forbidden to hold intact the marriage-tie with that woman, while the verse 5:6 speaks about performing a new marriage with a woman who is from the people of the book.

The subject matters, therefore, of the two verses are not the same. Accordingly there arises no question of abrogation at all.

Second: Even if we accept for the time being that verses 2:221 and 60:10 forbid marriage with a Jewess or a Christian woman, the context compels us to believe that they cannot abrogate verse 5:6 which allows that marriage.

Verse 5:6 shows some relaxation of the rule and Allah describes it as His grace upon the believers. Such a verse cannot be abrogated. In Islam relaxed rules usually get the upper hand over strict ones.

Therefore, if there were any abrogation, verse 5:6 would abrogate verses 2:221 and 60:10, and not vice versa.

Third: The chapter of *al Baqarah* (ch. 2) was the first one revealed at Medina soon after *Hijrah*; and the chapter of *al-Mumtahanah* (ch. 60) was revealed at Medina before the take-over of Mecca in 8 A.H.: while the chapter of *al-Ma'idah* (ch. 5) was the last one revealed — it abrogated some previous rules but no rule revealed in it was ever abrogated.

How could the verses revealed before the chapter 5 abrogate the verse of that chapter which was yet to be revealed?

Qur'an: and certainly a believing bondswoman is better than an idolatress, even though she should allure you:

The people at that time accorded no dignity to slave-girls and anyone marrying such a woman immediately became an object of scorn.

This verse, by qualifying the word “bondswoman” with the adjective “believing” and leaving the word “idolatress” without any condition, emphasizes the principle that a believing woman, even if she is a slave, is better than an idolatress even if she comes from a noble family and is rich and beautiful — the factors which usually attract a man towards a woman.

Someone has said that the word “bondswoman” (*amah*, أمة) here and the word “bondsmen” (*abd*, عبد) in the next sentence, mean slave woman and slave man of Allah — in other words, believing woman

and believing man. But this interpretation is farfetched.

Qur'an: and certainly a believing bondsman is better than an idolater, even though he should allure you:

The same comment as above.

Qur'an: Those invite to the fire, and Allah invites to the garden and to forgiveness by His leave:

It explains the reason why marriage with idol-worshippers has been prohibited. The idolaters believe in falsehood, walk on the wrong path, and, thus, evil characteristics become firmly rooted in their psychology.

Disbelief and sin look attractive to them and their eyes lose the ability to see the light of truth. As a result, their whole life becomes an open invitation to follow them to eternal perdition. In short, by their actions and talks they try to allure and entice the believers to the fire of hell.

The believers, on the other hand, proceed on the path of true faith, and live a righteous and virtuous life; and by their good example in words and deeds invite people to the paradise and the Lord's forgiveness by His leave, as He allowed them to call the people into the right path, leading them to eternal bliss — paradise and forgiveness.

Apparently, it would have looked proper to say, "and these (i.e. the believers) invite to the paradise...", as the contrasting sentence says: "those invite to the fire."

But Allah used His own name instead of the believers to show that the believers in this invitation, nay, in all their activities and affairs, rely on their Creator and Lord; they are not independent of Allah, their Master. Allah says:

...and Allah is the Master of the believers. (3:68)

This sentence may be interpreted also in another way: The invitation to the garden and to forgiveness may be a reference to this law itself — the rule forbidding marriage with polytheists is in itself an invitation to paradise and the forgiveness of Allah.

Traditions

It is written about this verse that it was revealed about Marthad ibn Abi Marthad al-Ghanawi. The Messenger of Allah sent him to Mecca to bring some Muslims out; and he was a strong and brave man.

A woman, 'Unaq by name, offered him her person, but he refused; they had been friends before the advent of Islam. Then she said: "Well, will you then agree to marry me?"

He said: “Not before I seek permission from the Messenger of Allah” When he returned (to Medina), he asked permission to marry her. [*Majma‘u ‘l-bayan*]

The author says: The same thing has been narrated in *ad-Durru ‘l-manthūr* from Ibn ‘Abbas.

al-Wahidi has narrated through the chain of as-Suddi from Abū Malik from Ibn ‘Abbas about this verse that it was revealed about ‘Abdullah ibn Rawahah.

He had a black slave-girl; once he became angry and slapped her (on the face). Then he felt frightened, and coming to the Prophet told him the story.

The Prophet said: “What is she? O ‘Abdullah!” He replied: “She keeps the fast, prays, does *wudh* properly, and offers testimony that there is no god except Allah and that you are His Messenger.”

The Prophet said: “O ‘Abdullah! She is a believing woman.” ‘Abdullah said: “By Him Who sent you with truth! I shall surely set her free and then marry her.” He did so.

Some Muslims ridiculed him and said, “Lo! He married a slave-girl”. They thought it better to establish marriage-ties with polytheist men and women, because they were of “honourable” families.

Then Allah revealed:

and certainly a believing bondswoman is better than an idolatress ... [*ad-Durru‘l-manthūr*]

Another tradition, quoted in the same book from Muqatil says that she was a bondswoman of Hudhayfah, whom he emancipated and married.

The author says: The above traditions are not contradictory. Maybe there were various such cases, and then the verse was revealed covering all of them.

There are some traditions showing that this verse abrogated verse 5:6, or was abrogated by it. We have shown the absurdity of these views, and we shall discuss those traditions when commenting on verse 5:6.

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