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The Noble Zahra (‘a): The Epitome of Women

- What was your motive for writing the book *Banu-ye Nimunah-ye Islam* (The Model Woman of Islam)?

Reply: My second work was the book *Banu-ye Nimunah-ye Islam* which I wrote in the year AH 1349 (approximately AD 1970). For a long time I was thinking that we must provide the Islamic society with an ideal family as a paragon with which men and women can learn lessons for all areas of life. The best family that could be considered for this aim was the family of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (‘a) and Zahra (‘a).

This is because, among men, after the Prophet (S), Amir al-Mu‘minin (‘a) and among women, noble Fatimah (‘a) are the best of people and the great personages of Islam. Because they were Infallible, these two worthy personalities completely observed all their religious duties and lived by virtuous Islamic values. Thus, they can be considered models for families in marriage, social relations, and internal family relationships including *spousecraft*, raising children, household management, etc. Hence, I thought to inspect and examine this family and introduce it as a paragon.

In order to chronicle the family life of these two personages, two methods were available: One was investigation of their inherent virtues. Amir al-Mu‘minin (‘a) and noble Zahra (‘a) each possessed intrinsic virtues due to their infallibility and investigating these was, in itself, an extensive affair. The second method was illustration of the family and to some extent social behavior of these luminaries. This was my main purpose; even so, I also more or less engaged in the first focus though my intent for this was also to elucidate the practical program and behavior of these two great personalities.

At first I believed that our Islamic sources were very rich and profuse regarding the life of noble Zahra (‘a). However, during my research I realized that, in fact, we have very few references because the lifespan of *Hadhrat*¹ Zahra (‘a) and especially her married life was very short. In addition, due to her main responsibilities, a large portion of the life of this guiding light was played out at home and people are less notified of what goes on within the homes of others. Therefore, we do not have thorough information regarding the details of *Hadhrat* Zahra’s (‘a) behavior. Moreover, the women of that age were under various restrictions and the nature of these restrictions was that no one realized the details

of their behavior. Basically, behavioristic matters were not considered important enough to mention. Although I was faced with such problems, I tried to use anything I could, however miniscule, and extract results.

As I advanced in the study, I became more interested and attracted to the issue; it achieved a spiritual aspect. The perfect character of noble Zahra ('a) had greatly affected me such that many times I cried while writing. I had become captivated. My inspiration to pursue the subject further would strengthen by the moment. At this juncture it seems suitable to reminisce about one of my memories:

When the book was finished I softly spoke to the *Hadhrat*: 'O Daughter of the Prophet! If this work is satisfactory and acceptable to you I desire a reward from you.' Due to the course of events, I was not able to go to *Hajj* because I did not wish to go as a caravan cleric or using similar titles, and I did not want to pay by installments. I also did not have enough money to go on my own. Naturally, I almost had no hope. Therefore, I said before the presence of the exalted Sadiqah Tahirah ('a): 'The prize I want from you is a *Hajj* pilgrimage. I want to go to *Hajj* with my own money and I want my pilgrimage to be successful.'

One day, I was walking home through *Safa'iah* street in Qum when a man that I was somewhat acquainted with pulled his car over to the side of the road and insisted that he take me where I wanted to go. I finally got into his car. He asked where my house was and took me there. At the door he said: We want to compile and author religious books for some Islamic schools in Tehran. We have the permission of the Department of Education and Training. I want to put you in charge of the work so that we may prepare a suitable book with the collaboration of some others.

Because I had not worked on children's books until then, the job seemed hard for me and I said that I could not. However, he insisted and when he left he was still adamant that I certainly accept the project. Then he put two, one thousand toman bills, which had recently entered circulation at the time, on the mantel and left. For a time, I endeavored to prepare the preliminaries for the job until he again came to my house. As much as I tried to evade the job he would not accept and he said: You are the only one for the job. Again before he left, he put two one thousand toman bills on the mantel. That made it four thousand tomans.

The job was forced upon me. At the time, they were registering people for *Hajj* in *Safa'iah* street. I took the four thousand tomans and signed up for *Hajj*. I do not remember where I got the rest of the money (five hundred tomans) that was needed for the pilgrimage. Anyway, that year I made a pilgrimage to the House of God. After that also I succeeded in making a few more pilgrimages in the most desirable manner to *Hajj*. In two of my journeys I was able to visit the interior of the *Ka'bah* and I do not see this as anything but the favor of the noble Zahra ('a).

It has been over 27 years from the first print of the book *Banu-ye Nimunah-ye Islam*. By the grace of Allah, the Almighty, the book was reprinted at least once almost every year. The fact that in the recent

prints it is written 14th or 15th print is because in the past they did not write the print number and it is much more than that. Every year it has been reprinted at least once and sometimes even twice. It has also been translated to some foreign languages. Even though 27 years has passed from its authorship, it is still considered a new book and this is due to nothing but the special favor and grace of the lauded Zahra ('a).

I have continually tried to add on new content I found in Hadith or the Quran or things that came to my mind. Its file was always and still is open to amendment and improvement. Throughout these years I have made significant changes a few times and have added new content. This may have had influence in the continuing novelty and freshness of the book.

- What are the criteria for a model woman? Can the passage of time influence such criteria?

Reply: Temporal transition and transformations in the circumstances of human life do not remold the substructures and fundamentals of human life. Only superstructures, lifestyle, and forms of human communication change. The nature and constitution of humans is uniform in all ages and generations. The Traditions of Allah (i.e. the laws of existence), which includes the laws governing human life, are all constant and immutable. The relationships of humans with God, the society—including family—and nature are relationships that in their essence follow set principles and cannot change.

As a woman who was enlightened in these values and lived by divine and human standards, *Hadhrat* Zahra ('a) can serve as a perfect example for all humans until the end of time. In other words, we can say just as religion is unchanging and constant, an exemplar may also be constant and eternal. We need not set details that are not values or basics per se and are direct results of prevailing circumstances as our paragon. Rather, we should accurately understand the measures and values derived from the conduct of the Infallibles ('a) and execute them in our lives according to current states of affairs.

Can anyone claim that the essence of choosing and taking a suitable spouse, simplicity and unpretentiousness in living, reciprocal respect and mutual understanding among spouses, devotion and sacrifice, defense of the rights of the family, honesty and integrity, giving importance and endeavoring to train children, feeling responsibility towards the society, and similar issues are things whose righteousness and value transform with the passage of time? All these are seen in the life of the lofty Zahra ('a) and people such as she can be a perfect paradigm for everyone for all time.

- What important and facilitating characteristic in the life of *Hadhrat* Zahra ('a) has drawn your attention the most?

Reply: In truth, the lives of *Hadhrat* Zahra ('a) and Amir al-Mu'minin ('a) are intriguing and perfect examples in all aspects. However, that which most enchanted me was their modest livelihood. *Hadhrat* 'Ali ('a) was the second personage of Islam and the Prophet's (S) son-in-law. If it was not for the struggles and selflessness of Imam 'Ali ('a) Islam could not have easily attained such success. His was a

superior character in all aspects. Fatimah Zahra ('a) was both the greatest of women and the daughter of the Prophet (S) and as such she was honored by him. Even so, they lived in ultimate simplicity. They endeavored to keep their livelihood even below the usual and common level of the times. They endured the hardships of life more than others and *Hadhrat* Zahra ('a) was completely willing and prepared for this. This is a very important matter because at the time the Prophet (S) kept the Islamic funds and taxes and he could for example provide an extensive trousseau for his daughter or he could have given 'Ali ('a) great sums of money for his services to Islam to help him in his life. But he did not do this.

The noble Zahra ('a) observed this value very carefully and endured all types of hardships with heart and soul and never made excuses or protests. One day the Prophet (S) saw a curtain in *Hadhrat* Zahra's ('a) house. When he left her house to pray Fatimah ('a) felt that he got upset that she had a curtain. She gathered the curtain and sent her children to take the curtain to the Prophet (S) at the mosque. The Prophet (S) was elated and said: My daughter has done what I wanted. Their entire life is imbued with simplicity and in my opinion this is very important.

- Why is simplicity in livelihood and abstinence from consumerism and luxury considered a value? Is this recommendable for everyone or only officials, leaders, and their families?

Reply: It is a general principle that wealthy and prosperous people should help the weak and needy classes. In addition, they must not live in such a manner that the inclination for luxury is intensified and fortified among the various social classes and causes the unhappiness of the lower classes. Islam in no way endorses competition for luxury. That which one wants to spend for luxury must be spent for social affairs and helping the poor. However, officials and those that, spiritually or politically, possess elevated statuses or are great personages must pay special attention to the matter. If they even wish to live luxuriously with their own personal and legitimate property and be bound to welfare, others will also follow this path and the lives of those that are not economically endowed will become more difficult.

Another detriment to the society in this area is that fundamental beliefs and values in the minds and hearts of the people will become undermined. They will say: When our personages act in this manner it is evident that the cardinal purpose is money and materiality and spirituality has no real credence.

Even if there were no poor and disadvantaged people in the society and the extravagance and profligacy of the prosperous did not have a detrimental effect on others, simplicity in livelihood would still be a value and duty. This is because Islam is opposed to wastefulness and prodigality and deems these things indecent even if there are no poor in the society. Instead of using wealth for luxuries and formalities, it should be used on the path of growth and perfection of the society so that the people and society advance in all areas and become powerful.

In order to attain this purpose, we must lessen our material attachment because the more attachment we humans have to the world the farther we get from spirituality. However, worldliness is not just having wealth, welfare, or excellent facilities it is also extreme affection to such things. A person may be poor

not because of their lack of interest in the world but because even though they were overly fond of the world they were not successful in attaining wealth or a person may have very few worldly possessions but love them dearly and be extremely attached to them.

These human spiritual inclinations may also be influential in the methods and strategies of acquiring riches. A person who has great love for worldly chattel seeks it in any way and does not refrain from injustice, unfairness, oppression, or sin. On the other hand, persons who are not greatly attached to the world do not see illegitimate paths open before themselves and abstain from violating the rights of others.

The great Zahra (‘a) was daughter to the Prophet (S) and wife to the vicegerent of God. The conformance of the life of this luminary with the values and slogans of the Prophet (S) and *Hadhrat* ‘Ali (‘a), her simple livelihood, her attention to spirituality, and her high regard for the interest and benefit of the society were things that can be considered the secrets of the Holy Prophet’s (S) success.

Of course, the value of simple living is not limited to the time of the Prophet (S). The people expect all those who claim to be good Muslims, those who support Islam, those who have gained renown as Islamic personages or proponents of the Islamic government to live like the Prophet (S), Amir al-Mu’minin (‘a), and Fatimah Zahra (‘a). If the people observe simplicity and lack of attachment to the world, they will become fond of religious authorities, the Islamic government, and officials. On the other hand, if they see attachment and lavishness and a chasm between words and deeds, they lose hope in these things.

The trustworthiness of a savant that describes the life of Fatimah Zahra (‘a) and ‘Ali (‘a), praises the justice of ‘Ali (‘a), speaks of the underprivileged and downtrodden but has a luxurious life—albeit through legitimate wealth—comes into question. The people say the Prophet (S) and *Hadhrat* ‘Ali (‘a) worked and surely their great intelligence and incredible foresight brought them great benefits. Even so, whatever they obtained, they would give it to the poor. The people also expect the same nowadays from government officials.

Thus, religious personages and officials of the Islamic government have a great responsibility in that they must be very careful of their behavior and that of their families and those close to them. If they live correctly they are in effect propagating Islam.

Some women encourage their husbands to prodigality, overindulgence, and luxury—living in order to “keep up with the Joneses”. They must take example from the life of noble Zahra (‘a) and know that if they perform an offence and desist from observing their status and station they are harming the Islamic government and are answerable in the next life.

- Regarding her social relationships and activities, which characteristic of *Hadhrat* Zahra (‘a) has entranced you the most?

Reply: *Hadhrat* Zahra ('a) was present in political and social activities in various manners. Participation in war related issues, even direct participation in behind the lines activities, spiritual and mental cooperation and aid of Amir al-Mu'minin ('a) in matters of *Jihad*, holding meetings for education and edification, and similar tasks. However, I believe that the most important issue for Fatimah Zahra ('a) was defense of the right and vicegerency of Amir al-Mu'minin ('a) which she worked on as a social duty in any form possible. For instance, regarding the *Fadak* affair the basic essence and reason for her deeds and persistent follow ups was the defense of right and vicegerency.

Even her last effort in which she willed that her husband hold her funeral and bury her in the middle of the night and conceal the grave was an extension to *Hadhrat* Zahra's ('a) political and social presence. It shows the intensity of her purpose and greatness because everyone likes others to attend their funeral procession and burial and honor them, they like others to come to their graves and remember them. However, this great woman sacrificed all this for the purpose and message that was her duty to convey.

- Without taking into account her infallibility, what individual, familial, social factors and influences in her background helped determine the formation of Fatimah Zahra's ('a) virtues?

Reply: *Hadhrat* Zahra ('a) had a superior familial position. She was born into the house of a father who was the best teacher and guide of all of humanity. Her mother was also not an ordinary person. In a time that women were subject to great deprivation, Khadijah ('a) was a woman who was able to establish and manage a great commercial firm and dispatch grand commercial caravans to other countries.

This shows the intrinsic worthiness of this woman. In my opinion, even more important than this was the correct determination, deep understanding, and exact insight in human character of this woman who had great wealth and social standing that caused her to propose marriage to a person who did not have a great financial standing in the society and was an employee in her business. This shows how subtle and sharp-sighted she was in apprehending lofty human values which she decisively and faithfully chose and preferred over material values.

Also, after the fact, when the Prophet (S) was appointed by Allah, she put all her belongings in his control to use for furthering Islam. *Hadhrat* Zahra ('a) grew up and was trained by such a mother and father. She matured in a family that was immersed in religion and perpetual struggle for the faith. Later, when she entered her husband's household, she lived with a person who was the spiritual son of and had been trained by the Prophet of Allah (S) and who was the essence of human virtues. And all these people and events had roles in the formation of the superior character of Siddiqah Tahirah ('a).

Fatimah ('a) was the daughter of the Prophet (S) and Khadijah ('a), the wife of 'Ali ('a), the mother of the two Hassans ('a) and the two Zainabs ('a)... But, I must say that the most expressive word is that: "Fatimah was Fatimah". Sometimes the character and prestige of a person is due to their kinship with their father, mother, or others. However, in addition to having these merits, the character of *Hadhrat* Zahra ('a) was because she was Fatimah and due to her inherent personality and greatness.

The fact that in some prayers handed down by the Infallibles ('a), noble Zahra ('a) is addressed using her relation to others is because it is necessary to emphasize these relationships to people so that they are made aware that these are the *People of the House* [*Ahl al-Bayt*] of the Prophet (S) and so that they remember what was written in the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet (S) regarding the dignity and status of the Ahl al-Bayt.

There are many instances in history where the Imams ('a) emphasized this aspect so that even if the people could not comprehend their other merits, they would not forget this merit and know them through this. Another issue is that when we address the noble Zahra ('a) as the "Daughter of the Prophet of Allah (S)" [*binta rasul allah*], this means the true daughter of the prophethood. This is different from saying, for example, daughter of Muhammad (S). When we say Daughter of the Prophet of Allah (S) the person and physical relationship is not intended; rather, it is the character and spiritual relationship of the person we intend.

- What expectations did *Hadhrat* Fatimah ('a) have of the people in her historical speech in the Madinah Mosque and what was the reason for her anger?

Reply: The momentous and sensitive speech *Hadhrat* Fatimah Zahra ('a) made in the Mosque of the Prophet (S) and among his followers was a very interesting occurrence which showed the depth of the character of her eminence. Such a brilliant and meaningful oration by a bereaved and pained woman and in such times with their problems and limitations shows her great social commitment, precise power of analysis, and boundless spiritual and mental prowess. In this lecture, the *Hadhrat* ('a) referred to the people's shining record of service to the Prophet (S) and then maintained that their current behavior was opposed to prior expectations.

It is a fact that from her childhood *Hadhrat* Zahra ('a) was witness to all the sufferings of her father. She experienced the Shi'b of Abitalib,² she saw the torture Muslims were subject to, she felt the hunger and pressure the Muslims bore for the advancement of their religion with her whole being, she was witness to all the steadfastness, struggles, emigrations, and martyrdoms of the Muslims. She remembered the history of Islam from a time of conditions that caused Muslims not to be able to perform their religious rites and ceremonies in peace, up to the time when the Muslims attained greatness and the advancement and development of Islam gained great momentum.

Hadhrat Zahra ('a) had much hope for the future of Islam and it was not far from reality for the light of Islam to illuminate the whole world. All these triumphs were due to the endeavors and leadership of the Prophet (S) and the sacrifice, selflessness, and unity of the Muslims. However, on that day, against all expectations, she saw a new problem for the advancement of Islam.

There was neither a trace of continuing divine leadership nor unity of the Islamic community [*ummah*]. Thus, she was upset: What happened to all my father's advice about holding fast the rope of Allah [*habl Allah*]? She knew of the knowledge, infallibility, piety, and management abilities of 'Ali ('a) and she saw

that the people disregarded all the guidance and divine sayings of the Prophet (S) regarding ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (‘a). The deep sorrow of Zahra (‘a) arose from observing the great distance and gaping chasm between that which should have been and that which was.

● Sometimes the characters and lives of *Hadhrat* Fatimah (‘a) and the other Infallibles are introduced as entirely composed of sadness and sorrow and blended with lamentation and grieving. Is this correct?

Reply: That which is discussed as the greatest element regarding the character of the Infallible Imams (‘a) and noble Zahra (‘a) is that their thoughts, morals, and mannerisms must be examples for the people because we can easily declare that Islam was absolutely manifested in their existence. Our love for our Infallible leaders is love of completely perfect manifestations of Islamic commandments, beliefs, and values.

Our duty toward the leaders of our religion is that we must love them as perfect divine examples, understand their thought, execute their instructions, and structure all aspects of our lives by their intended standards. The exemplariness of the Prophet (S) which was stated in the Holy Quran is a principle and it teaches us that we must, more than anything, see the Infallibles (‘a) in this perspective.

...لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ

“Surely you have in the Prophet of Allah a good example...”³

The Holy Prophet (S), Pure Imams (‘a), and Fatimah Zahra (‘a) were each afflicted with various worldly tribulations and adversities and it is a truth that due to their emphasis and decisiveness in righteousness and extraordinary intransigence before evil, they were treated with animosity, oppression, and spite by antagonists. We must join in their sadness, sympathize with them, and shed tears for them. This is a necessity for being their allies and followers.

However, that which is of greater import and which essentially must be the soul of mourning and lamenting is that we must learn from them, from their words, their deeds, and their whole lives. Our mourning gatherings must be held for this purpose. However, with utmost regret we see that the situation has changed; meaning that instead of accepting them as our role models and learning from their lives, we have lost everything about the leaders of our religion and only remember their calamities and mourning.

What I mean is that Imam Hussain (‘a) did not go to Karbala to die so that we might cry for him and go to heaven. He had a purpose for going to Karbala and our chief duty regarding this great man is to *follow his objectives*. This is the best service and task that will both make Imam Hussain (‘a) happy and have the most rewards and recompense for us in the afterlife. In fact, this is the true meaning of Imamate and Vicegerency [*wilayat*].

It is the same regarding the other Infallibles (‘a). We must realize the reason for *Hadhrat Zahra’s* (‘a) stance and behavior, why she made those speeches, why she was insistent on the affair of Fadak, and so on. We must know our duty as Shi‘as and followers and friends of Zahra (‘a). We have erroneously let go of all this and have held fast only to the weeping.

Of course, various Hadith state that crying for Hussain entails much otherworldly reward [*thawab*], and this is true. We might cry for Imam Hussain (‘a) because he was surrounded by enemies in Karbala and was killed while he and his children were thirsty and parched. These tears do not have the true value that must be sought. However, if we cry for Imam Hussain (‘a) because this grand man rose up in defense of Islam, stood against evil with his whole being without the slightest doubt or hesitation for God, wholeheartedly accepted all the hardships of this path, and was ultimately tyrannously martyred due to the naïveté, insensateness, derangement, negligence, nonchalance, sybaritism, and greed of those who regarded themselves the Ummah of the Prophet (S) and followers of his religion, such tears have value; such tears mean alignment and unity with Hussain; such tears mean being Shi‘a.

If we cry for Fatimah Zahra (‘a) because she was an eighteen year old woman who took no pleasure from life and was oppressed and her Fadak was misappropriated and the like, this has no real value. Crying for *Hadhrat Zahra* (‘a) has value when we know and realize that she was undeviating and adamant for her purpose and because of this she endured many hardships. We can cry in two ways for a *shahid* (martyr). One way we can cry is because they died unfulfilled or unmarried and took no pleasure from life, which is worthless.

However, sometimes the magnificence, beauty, and greatness of their act causes our hearts to tremble and tears to flow. We cry—for why should evil have power in the world so that it may overcome righteousness in such a manner? Such tears are constructive motivators. They strengthen the passion and eagerness for Godly deeds within the souls of humans and thus, they have value. It is a great tragedy that we have lost this aspect and have fallen into other paths. All of us have the duty to remedy this occurrence. As long as we do not rectify this affair, many of our problems shall endure.

- In your opinion what are the roots of these problems?

Reply: Those who propagate these things more than anyone else are eulogists and tragedians. They must be made knowledgeable so that they can perform their duties correctly. They must be perfectly acquainted with Imam Hussain (‘a), *Hadhrat Zahra* (‘a), and noble Zainab (‘a) and introduce them accurately. Eulogists must be made to realize that they must incorporate useful purposes into their poetry. If eulogists pay attention to these aspects and delineate, realistically and properly, the personalities of the Saints of God in their mourning ceremonies and pay the most attention to learning from them, these problems will resolve themselves and they must be resolved because the current state of affairs is truly not right.

The people should be made aware that listening to and orating eulogies and attending ceremonies of

Imam Hussain (‘a) can only be useful when, through them, they are enlightened with the aims and teachings of this luminary. Mourning him is only useful when it is for the path and purpose of Imam Hussain (‘a). The people must be careful that they not accept everything that is said in such ceremonies. In order to make the people cry, some eulogists present many weak and untruthful materials. Sometimes they say things that reduce the status and personality of those great individuals even lower than normal people.

In any event, the laws of supply and demand also hold true here. Because the masses want tears, eulogists and preachers take more to this path to make people cry even with untrue attributions to the Imams (‘a)! We should not neglect the fact that fabrication is a sin and *haram* and lying about the Imams (‘a) is even worse. Without having competence in this area, some have entered the field and have gained renown. Thus, they imply incorrect duties regarding the greatness of the Imams (‘a) and the people’s responsibilities towards them, and wrongly present various issues such as some aspects of intercession [*shafa‘at*] to the people. They also promote styles of lamentation that are not without fault.

In my opinion, religious authorities have the greatest responsibility in guiding these programs. Religious authorities must analyze the facts correctly and inform the people. They must not dissimulate [*taqiyyah*] before the people. Just as Shahid Mutahari—may God bless him—has put forth some great materials in speeches that were gathered into a book called *Epic of Husaini Valor* [*hamasah-ye husaini*]. In times that were very different from today, he had the courage to say words of righteousness.

Nowadays the path has been widened and paved because the people are more enlightened. It is the certain duty of religious authorities to provide insight. Religious authorities should not be public-oriented in that they verify and follow any custom or way that becomes common in the society. In revealing righteousness one should not fear the anger or dismay of others. All religious authorities, writers, mass media—everyone must perform their duty; otherwise the situation will become worse day by day.

At the decline of the previous regime and the apex of the religious Movement our religious societies were much better. I remember that because preachers could not plainly state regime and government matters, they would assert these issues by analyzing the uprising of Aba ‘Abdillah al-Husain (‘a) and its objectives.

However, now, instead of in depth analysis of such issues, the main issue is forgotten and we have returned to where we were before. If we want to hold a ceremony or do something in the name of religion, it should be according to religious precepts. A deed worthy of rewards is not something we can just make up by ourselves. We must see if there is a religious reason behind it or not; if it is congruous with religious principles, values, and aims or not. However, can just anyone do these things?

Again only religious authorities can and must. They must examine the methods and styles of mourning and their content to find from where an innovation [*bid‘at*] stems, why it exists, what effect it has on the society, and if, God forbid, there are deviations they must be corrected. Especially programs that are

broadcast by the Television and Radio Department of the Islamic Republic of Iran must be scrutinized and it must be determined whether the thoughts and deeds of the people that make the programs are sound.

1. – This is an honorific title that precedes the name of great personages. [trans.]

2. – This is an area where the unbelievers of Mecca banished the Muslims for several years. [trans.]

3. – Surah Ahzab 33:21.

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