

# **Qur'anic Misinterpreted Verses**



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## The Nature of Scripture Interpretation

The interpretation of the verses of the Qur'an customary made concerning the historical, grammatical and thematic aspects of the verses. Some of the Qur'anic verses were revealed addressing issues current to that time of history, while others were revealed addressing general principle or matter applicable to every time and place. All verses serve as guidance for Muslims. The substance addressed to a specific location with specific people may or may not apply to subjects outside the scope of the verses. Unless the addressees elucidated, the Qur'anic verses would not interpret correctly.

Misinterpretation of the verses of the Qur'an occurs when the historical, grammatical and thematic contextual aspects not taken into consideration. Unfortunately, some people wrongly accuse Islam of teaching violence based on an improper understanding of a few verses of the Qur'an that were addressed to a specific group of people, with a particular historical background. We will explore these verses in the light of their historical framework and the subject matter to bring about their correct meaning and purpose. The first to be addressed is verse 191 from Chapter, Baqarah, 2:191. This revelation is misunderstood to command Muslims to kill disbelievers, Christians, and Jews. For us to study this verse within its historical and subject matter context, we need to consider verse 190 as well. Verses 190-191 say:

***And fight in the cause of God those who have (initially) waged war against you, but do not transgress limits (by causing more damage to your enemy than the damage they initially caused you, thereby expanding the circle of war). indeed, Allah loves not transgressors [190]. And slay them wherever you overtake them and expel them from where they have expelled you (a reference to Quraysh who***

**for 14 years had been expelling the Muslims from Mecca), for tumult and oppression (that Quraysh heavily incurred on you) are worse than killing; but fight them not at the Inviolable House of Worship, unless they (first) fight you there. If they were to fight you, then do not be reluctant to kill them. Such is the recompense of the disbelievers (in the sanctity of the Holy Shrine of Ka'ba). [191]**

Considering the history surrounding these verses, we learn that they were revealed after the peace treaty of Hudaibiyah was signed between the Idolaters of Quraysh and the Muslims in the year six after emigration, and before the performing of one of the treaty's conditions. This condition states that the Muslims visit Mecca and perform the Lesser Pilgrimage in the following year.

As that time neared, some Muslims were concerned that Quraysh might not fulfill its promise in allowing the Muslims to enter Mecca and conversely attack them while performing their rituals. God indeed answered this legitimate concern in the above verses. In the event Quraysh broke the Hudaibiyah peace agreement by attacking the Muslims during the pilgrimage, only then were Muslims commanded to defend themselves and given the details of how to act on the battlefield. Muslims were told to kill the Idolaters wherever they may come upon them and to drive them away from wherever they initially turned them away from. They were commanded to preserve the old sanctity of the Shrine of Ka'ba by not fighting in it (But fight them not at the Sacred Mosque, unless they [first] fight you there.) Note in verse 190 the subject of the verb "fight" is the clause (those who have [initially] waged war against you). This descriptive clause makes direct reference to Quraysh and could not be mistaken by any other than the Idolaters of Quraysh. Similarly, the first part of verse 191, the subject of the verbs "slay," "overtake," and "expel" is Quraysh, who earlier had expelled the Muslims from Mecca.

The second part of verse 191, however, a new descriptive word, *kafireen*, is given to the subject to-be-killed for fighting in the Sacred Mosque. The word *kafireen*, disbelievers, can take two possible meanings: a) Quraysh who is the reference in the previous verse and who is also the guardian of the Holy Shrine, and b) specific people of Quraysh who disbelieved in the age-old sanctity of the Ka'ba and incurred violence within it. If Quraysh or those who disbelieved in the age-old virtue of the Ka'ba fight you, only then do not be reluctant to kill them. The majority of the Qur'anic interpreters took the word *kafireen* in the second part of verse 191 to mean the Idolaters of Quraysh as a whole. Other interpreters took the word *kafireen* to be those who incurred violence within the Holy Shrine of Ka'ba from amongst Quraysh. Dr. Fathi Othman in his book, *The Concepts of the Quran* is one of those who took this approach. Dr. Othman's approach seems to be the more accurate one since the requital of killing is made to the subject in the second part of verse 191, those who 'disbelieved in the sanctity' of the Inviolable House of Worship. In either case, the word disbelievers in verse 191 cannot be taken to mean Christians nor Jews or any disbeliever other than Quraysh. Thus, the claim that Islam teaches violence is proven false. On the contrary, many see these two verses as a ground for Islam's quest for peace. Such that even when Muslims were commanded to fight in self-defense, they were instructed to practice war-morality: Do not start a fight. But fighting in the cause of God those who initially fight you but do not transgress limits thereby expanding the circle of war. The word the majority of scholars interpret "limit" as "limiting enemy's loss only to their own." Any more loss beyond that is considered transgression.

Thus, the verse teaches Muslims not to start hostility and to use hostility-stopping techniques if war ever began. Causing more damage to the enemy is an invitation to more violence. Furthermore, the Qur'an commands Muslims that if the opponents are inclined towards a truce, they are to seek an end to hostilities. Allah said: "But if the enemy inclined to peace, then incline to it." Qur'an 8:61

Reflecting on this fundamental Islamic teaching, Karen Armstrong in her book, *Muhammad, A Biography of the Prophet* stated: "The Qur'an teaches that war is always abominable. Muslims must never open hostilities, ...but, once they have taken a war, Muslims must fight with absolute commitment to bring the fighting to an end as soon as possible." *Muhammad, A Biography of the Prophet*, Page 209 Studying the Qur'anic verses in the light of its historical context is an ever important matter in understanding Islam, its people, and their culture. The second verse to be examined is verse five from Chapter Bara'ah, or Declaration of Disassociation. A good study of the verse, again, its subject matter context must be considered along with other verses that revealed with it. Additional consideration must be given to the events and time period in which these verses were revealed.

## **Purifying Mecca: the Center of Orientation for all Muslims**

Chapter 9, Declaration of Disassociation, was revealed to Prophet Muhammad during the Pilgrimage season after the opening of Mecca. The subject of the first several verses of this chapter was to dissolve all treaty obligations, with few exceptions with the Idolaters of Quraysh, including the

Hudaybiyah Treaty.

Quraysh attacked one of the tribes in the Confederacy of the Muslims broke the Hudaybiyah Treaty of peace. After the breach of that treaty, the Prophet led an army of ten thousand people and peacefully entered his native city Mecca without any bloodshed. Then the Prophet pardoned the Meccans, whom, at large, entered Islam and the 360 idols around the Ka'ba destroyed. Some of Mecca's inhabitants, however, still practiced idol worship. Some of the tribes residing around Mecca, who did not embrace Islam, would bring their idols along with them to the Sacred Mosque to pray to during the Pilgrimage season.

There were other idol worship traditions such as the total removal of clothing during the ritual fulfillment. An idol-worshipping Pilgrimage tradition was to remove all the clothes that they had worn during committing sins for their Pilgrimage to be accepted by God. These traditions conflicted with the Islamic standards of decency and spirituality and the purpose of the pilgrimage.

After the opening of Mecca, Prophet Muhammad did not attend the following two Pilgrimages. Perhaps, the reasons for this was that he had to give ample time to those who did not accept Islam to evaluate their situation and to recognize the value and enter-dimensions of Islam. The process of changing customs and habits takes time. If this natural process violated, problems and violence could occur. Therefore the Prophet managed accordingly to give peace a chance, proving once more Islam's ever quest for peace.

After two years from the opening of Mecca and during the second Pilgrimage season, God revealed the Chapter of Declaration of Disassociation that among other things addressed the total termination of idol worshipping in and around the city of Mecca. Mecca, which holds the primordial faith of Abraham and the whole humanity, is to be the sacred center of the orientation of all Muslims. The process of returning Mecca to its original sanctuary was made in several steps, one of which is used by some westerners to accuse Islam of being a religion that teaches violence. Following are the steps outlined in these verses:

1. To announce to the pilgrims, led by Abu Bakr, that God and His Prophet disassociate themselves from the Idolaters, who violated the agreements of peace and that there will be no more agreements made between the Muslims and the Idolaters in the future. Note: Some Qur'anic interpreters illustrated that several of Quraysh tribes, except the tribes of Nadheer and Kenanah, broke the peace treaty of Hudaybiyah with the Muslims. Because of Quraysh's breach of the agreement, God disassociated Himself and His Prophet from any more commitment to this particular treaty (with the exception of the two tribes) as well as other informal and customary treaties that were not bound by conditions or time and ordered the believers to execute the order. See al Tafseer al Muneer, Volume 10, Page 99.
2. Any existing agreement (or part thereof) with the Idolaters, such as that with the tribes of Nadheer and Kenanah, shall be honored until its appointed time or until they breach the agreement. We must pause here to note Islam's quest for peace and justice by continuing to honor the agreement of Hudaybiyah with the tribes of Nadheer and Kenanah, who did not collaborate with Quraysh in breaching the peace treaty.
3. There will be no more idol worshipping in the Sacred places (Mecca and the Sacred Mosque). Note: the sanctity of Mecca with respect to Muslims is much like the Vatican City with respect to Christians.
4. A period of four months to be given as a respite to those who chose to keep worshipping idols to either leave the Sacred places or embrace Islam.
5. A severe warning of actual war, after the respite period against idolaters who insisted that they would stay in the Sacred places and refused to accept Islam. It is this verse and its severe warning to the idolaters that is misused today to accuse Islam of teaching violence by killing disbelievers, Christians, and Jews.

Below are verses 1-5 of Chapter 9, Declaration of Disassociation, to illustrate this misunderstanding and to show the correct perspectives of the verse.

***(This is a declaration of) Disassociation, from Allah and His Messenger to those whom you had made a treaty among the Idolaters (mushrikeen). So travel safely and freely, (O disbelieving Idolaters), throughout the land (during) four months but know that you cannot cause failure to God and that Allah will disgrace the disbelievers. And (it is) an announcement from God and His Messenger to the people on the day of the greater Pilgrimage (Hajj) that God is disassociated from the disbelievers, and (so is) His Messenger. So if you repent, that is best for you; but if you turn away – then know that you will not cause failure to God. And give tidings to those who***

***disbelieve in a painful punishment. Excepted are those with whom you made a treaty (limited by appointed time or condition) among the Idolaters, and then they have not been deficient toward you in anything or supported anyone against you; so complete for them their treaty until their term (has ended). Indeed God loves the righteous (who are fully aware of Him). And when the sacred months have passed, then kill the Idolaters (mushrikeen) wherever you find them and capture them and besiege them and sit in wait for them at every place of ambush. But if they should repent, establish prayer, and give charity (zakah), let them go on their way. Indeed Allah is Forgiving Merciful. Qur'an, 9:1-5***

To remove the misunderstanding, two basic points must be addressed here. First, the multiple meaning of the Arabic word "mushrikeen" and also the Islamic mechanism for the prevention of war by means of severe threat. 1- The multiple meaning of the Arabic word "mushrikeen." The word mushrikeen we encountered in the above verses is the plural of the word mushrik, from the base verb shirk. Shirk in the religious sense is worshipping "other things" with God.

"Other things" can be idols, people, materialistic things such as money and wealth and can even be position and power. The common English word for shirk is polytheism. In the above verse, however, the word mushrikeen applies to the Idolaters of Mecca and cannot be interpreted as the Christians and the Jews.

To comply with the interpretation's contextual aspects of the place, time and subject matter, mushrikeen in this case should only be translated as "Idolaters of Quraysh," who are the subject matter of the above verses and whom the declaration of disassociation was to be addressed to. Unfortunately, some English translations of the Holy Qur'an inaccurately translated the above word 'mushrikeen,' into its generic form as 'polytheists,' thus creating a major problem, especially among the non-Arabic readers.

It should be noted that Yusuf Ali, Pickthall, and M. H. Shakir's translations, which are among the most trusted translations, accurately gave the meaning of mushrikeen as 'idolaters' in this context. Over and over again, the Qur'an insists that the People of the Book (Christians and Jews) are to enjoy a special treatment from Muslims and that Islam did not cancel out the teachings of the previous apostles like Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Job, Moses, David, Solomon, and Jesus. Consequently, it is not possible that verse 191 of Chapter Baqara can be read to imply the killing of Christians and Jews. Below are a few of the verses that call for special treatment of the People of the Book.

***The food of the People of the Book is lawful unto you (Muslims) and your food is lawful unto them. Qur'an, 5:5***

A Muslim man is permitted to take into marriage, the most intimate relation and sacred bond, a Jewish or Christian woman:

***Lawful unto you in marriage are (not only) chaste women who are believers, but chaste women among the People of the Book revealed before your time when you give them their due dowers and desire chastity, and not lewdness, taking them as lovers. Qur'an, 5:5***

***Not all of them are alike: of the People of the Book are a portion that stands (for the right); they rehearse the signs of God all night long and they prostrate themselves in adoration. Qur'an, 3:113***

***Those who believe (in the Qur'an), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians, and the Sabians, any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. Qur'an, 2:62***

2- The Islamic mechanism for the prevention of war by means of severe threat  
Similar to the Islamic philosophy of severe punishment for prevention of vice and corruption, the Qur'an uses the belief of a severe threat of war to prevent an actual war. The psychological effect of severe war on people causes them to change or compromise in order to eliminate the war. This policy of avoiding war by the mere fact of its threat is very much like avoiding a traffic citation because of its severe penalty. This technique seems to work well. For other articles on this subject, refer to our posted article: ["Reflections on Punishment in the Islamic Law."](#)



It is only fair in some cases, such as the example above, where the majority of the Meccans had accepted Islam and ample time was given for the people who did not convert to re-examine their idol worship beliefs. The Idolaters were threatened with war if they did not move away from Mecca or cease their idol worship within the Sacred city. This diplomacy of threat averted war, and consequently, no one left Mecca. Thus, the diplomatic threat language of war in verse 9:5, dealing with the restoration of Mecca to its original sanctity, served as a psychological tool to prevent war.

The third verse to be explored is verse 29 of Chapter 9. The verse establishes that the People of the Book resident in an Islamic state, who are exempted from defending the state shall pay a defense-obligation exemption fee called jizya. If they refused to pay the jizya, then the state is obligated to obtain it by force. The verse clearly states:

***And fight against those who – despite having the Book (aforetime) – do not (truly) believe either in God or in the Last Day, nor consider forbidden that which God and the Conveyor of His Message have forbidden, nor follow the religion of truth (which God has enjoined upon them) until they agree to the payment of the exemption tax (of defense-obligations, jizya) by those who afford it and acknowledge their subjection (to the state). Qur'an, 9:29***

The nature of this verse with respect to fighting is not antagonistic because of ethnicity, but rather over monetary and regulatory issues within the state. A similar policy is applicable to the Muslims themselves when they refuse to pay their dues to the state. In the same manner, Christians and Jews are obligated to pay the state jizya, Muslims are obligated to pay to the state zakat. Zakah is a form of taxation similar to the tax that most people have to pay to their respective states. Similarly to the case of jizya with respect to the People of the Book, if Muslims, too, refused to pay zakat, then the state is obligated to obtain it by force. An example of this was the case of the Murtadeen, several tribes, who, during the rule of first Caliph Abu Bakr refused to pay zakat, a war was conducted against them until they paid it and acknowledged their subjection to the state.

In conclusion, the notion that the Holy Qur'an teaches intolerant violence is false. Islam's fabric is engrained in peaceful concepts and philosophies. The evidence is overwhelming regarding Islam's acceptance and special regard for the People of the Book. As for those who worship stones, Islam established that they should abandon their practice and repent. But if they insist on their practice of idol worship, it must not be conducted within the Sacred House of Ka'ba, the orientation point of all Muslims and the primordial faith of Abraham. Clarifications of interpretations in the correct historical context and more dialogue will promote goodwill and better understanding amongst all people.