

Lesson 4

11-26-09 The Open School Class: Explanation of Forty *Ahadith*

Summary

In light of the discussion on women, this lesson focuses on verse thirty-four of chapter four (*surat al-Nisa*) of the Qur'an. Before delving into the verse, one must understand that Islam does not sponsor the mistreatment of women. Individuals may mistreat women based on their misconceptions or culture, but just because a person, who claims to be a Muslim, does something wrong does not mean Islam is wrong (*e.g.*, Adolf Hitler claimed to be a Christian, but is it fair to blame Christianity for his actions?).

Now, there are some who pick and choose certain verses from the Qur'an to condemn Islam. However, if one really wants to seek truth, then one must analyze a subject honestly and consider the totality of the circumstances.

For example, when reading an article or a story, one cannot truly appreciate the story or information conveyed without understanding the background or historical context. It does not make sense to read and try to understand information in a vacuum. Misinterpretation and misguidance occurs without considering context (*e.g.*, the claims of the terrorists are based on misguidance due to the lack of understanding of context). The importance of understanding the background applies to everything, including the Qur'an.

Yes, the Qur'an is a divine book that will remain alongside the progeny of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon them all) until the Day of Resurrection, but the Qur'an was revealed in an Arabic language within a certain context and people. So when considering legislation in the Qur'an, as in any legislation, one must understand the background of that legislation (because that background may enlighten a person about a goal behind that specific legislation).

Looking at the background of the Qur'an, one sees that the Qur'an was revealed within an age of ignorance. Women really had no moral restrictions in their actions. Generally, they slept with multiple men even though they were married. Women would have children, but because the women had so

many sexual partners, the father of the children would not be known. The physical features of the children would be compared to the women's partners to try to figure out the identity of the father. Islam came to abolish this depravity. The injunctions of Islam applied moral restrictions to women (*e.g.*, they can only have sexual relations with their husbands). In this context, one must analyze the **Qur'an (4:34)**, which states:

Men are the managers of women, because of the advantage Allah has granted some of them over others, and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth. So righteous women are obedient, care-taking in the absence [of their husbands] of what Allah has enjoined [them] to guard. As for those [wives] whose misconduct you fear, [first] advise them, and [if ineffective] keep away from them in the bed, and [as the last resort] beat them. Then if they obey you, do not seek any course [of action] against them. Indeed Allah is all-exalted, all-great.

Focusing on the latter part of the verse, one sees that Allah (the Most High) tells men how to deal with their wives in regards to violation of the law. Again, in regards to context, this verse concerns women that are married (who do not want to get a divorce) and do not obey the law. So what can the husband do?

Looking at the verse, there are three stages. The first stage is to advise or admonish the deviant wife. If that does not work, the second stage is to avoid the wife in sexual relations (*e.g.*, if the husband is unhappy with his wife for having deviant relations, then he cannot also want to have sexual relations with her if she does not listen. That is sending mixed messages to the wife.). If nothing else works, the last stage is to beat the wife. These stages must be followed in order. One cannot skip stages. The "beating" is physically hitting the wife for correction purposes.¹

However, as mentioned above, one must understand this "beating" based on the background or historical context. Over 1,400 years ago, if one's wife did not want to get a divorce and she was having sexual relations with other men, what do you do? That husband, over 1,400 years ago, can admonish her and can also disassociate himself from her (in regards to sexual relations), but what if the wife still continues breaking the law?

At that time, the man would have to beat her to get her back on the straight path. The whole goal of the beating at that time was to punish for correction. The goal was not to beat, it was to correct. Islam does not want husbands to go around and beat their wives. If one studies the Islamic record in its totality, one will see that Islam endorses men to love women and treat them with respect and gentleness.

So, looking at the background, one sees that the beating was only a means, and the goal was to correct. Accordingly, the question is what should husbands do now? Yes, they should admonish, and they should disassociate from the sexual relations. What about the last stage? Yes, they should correct, but the correction should not be to physically beat the wife. Why?

Because nowadays, over 1,400 years later, the goal of correction will not be achieved by beating.

Sociological factors, psychological factors, and other factors of today should be taken into consideration in regards to effectiveness. If one beats his wife, he may end up in jail and the wife and society will consider it torture.

Today, there are systems and different means in play that one can use. The key is to achieve the goal of correction, not focus on the means used over 1,400 years ago. One may argue that such a suggestion is an insult to Islam or is going against the Qur'an.

On the contrary, such thinking does not go against the Qur'an. The wisdom of the three stages is intact and is being followed. Only the means of old (beating) is being replaced with means that fit the present to achieve the same goal, correction. For example, Allah (the Most Wise) says via the **Qur'an (22:27)**,

“And proclaim the hajj to people: they shall come to you on foot and on lean camels coming from distant places.”

Just because people used camels to go to pilgrimage over 1,400 years ago, is it wrong to use cars or planes to go to pilgrimage now? The camel was just a means for the goal of pilgrimage. If I try to go to pilgrimage on a camel today, I may never get there or may be put in jail for animal abuse. Islam is not a rigid religion. It is a religion of wisdom, and if one means does not work anymore to achieve a goal, then another means may be used to achieve the goal. Remember, the “beating” was only a means, not the goal.

1. Scholars debate over what the term “beating” actually means. However, a majority of scholars consider the “beating” to include physical hitting. There are maraji (jurists whom people emulate regarding Islamic legal matters) that say the beating is light physical hitting that does not cause harm or injuries.

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