

The Quran and its Message

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سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

UNDERSTANDING VERSES 2:72-73

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Verses 2:72-73 often provide an array of interpretations from commentators with different theological perspectives. Some can be elaborate and others quite fanciful. The following short article will attempt to understand the information that can be readily gleaned from the Arabic text, to appreciate and understand any limitations of any interpretations and to briefly study it in tandem with Biblical narratives. The latter with a view to provide a possible context along with what information the Quran already furnishes.

002:072

"And (remember) when you killed a man and then you disputed concerning it and God brought forth that which you were hiding"

002:073

"So We said, "Strike him (Arabic: id'hribuhu) with a part of it/her (Arabic: biba'di-ha)" Like this God revives the dead and shows you His signs perhaps you many use your intellect"

biba'di-ha

فَقُلْنَا أَضْرِبُوهُ بِبَعْضِهَا كَذَلِكَ يُحْيِي اللَّهُ الْمَوْتَى وَيُرِيكُمْ آيَاتِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

id'hribuhu

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT AND THE INFORMATION WITHIN THE VERSES

WHAT DOES THE ARABIC SAY?

The pronoun '**ha**' in *biba'di-ha*, is in the 3rd person singular feminine and is most likely a reference to the 'heifer' which seems very plausible in the context of the previous verses where the incident of a slaughtered cow is mentioned.

It must first be fully appreciated that there is clear recognition that the primary audience (Children of Israel) were familiar with the narrative (i.e. it was in their collective knowledge).

DETAILS FURNISHED BY THE QURAN

- A soul was killed (2:72).
- Although a 'nafs' is a feminine noun (plural *anfus* and *nufus*), it can represent either gender. However, the 'hu' in '*idhribu'hu*' (strike him) is a masculine singular pronoun therefore the corpse was most likely a male.
- There was an act of deliberate concealment (2:72).
- The truth of the matter was to be manifested by God (2:72).
- A female sacrificial cow (heifer) has some relevance in matters of disputed killings. Due to the limited information in the Quran, it appears that the primary audience to whom the narrative is directed (Children of Israel) **were clearly familiar with this practice.** (2:73)
- An analogy is imparted with which God brings the dead to life (2:73).
- This incident was to serve as a 'portent' to those who witnessed the event so that people could understand (2:73). It is merely narrated to the Children of Israel to remind them.

DETAILS INTENTIONALLY ABSENT FROM THE QURAN

- What the complete practice that involved a cow (heifer) entailed. '**Idhribuhu biba'di-ha**' simply means to strike something X with something Y, where X is **possibly** the corpse and Y **possibly** part of the heifer. However these remain best 'interpretations' given the context as these inferences (corpse and the heifer) **do not exist in the Arabic text explicitly.** The Quran simply does not intend to furnish the details. It can be argued that the phrase is simply propounding an example (as in *idhrib* - 36:13) and referring to the application of the principle to other cases. [1]
- What was struck, what part of the object was struck and what part of the striking object was utilised.
- If the corpse was roused, whether it ever spoke.
- The nature of the homicide, whether murder, manslaughter etc.
- Whether the death took place as the result of one person's involvement or many.
- Details of how the incident was resolved or how the truth was completely manifested.

WISDOM THAT CAN BE READILY ASCERTAINED WITH THE INFORMATION PROVIDED

- The Children of Israel had a specific practice to resolve a disputed killing **which they understood**.
- The Quran directly communicates with the Children of Israel with regards this incident to remind them of the veracity of information which may exist in their collective knowledge and the fact that a Supreme All-Knowledgeable God reveals the Quran with knowledge.
- God manifests truth in multifaceted ways if He so wills. At times situations are created from which truth can become manifested. (Also see 66:3).
- Despite clear signs, there are individuals that still will not heed them 2:74. (Generic wisdom)

It is also important to appreciate that the commandment to slaughter (tadhbahu) a cow in verse 2:67 should not be necessarily considered in the usual sacrificial sense (as was the practice on an altar). The Arabic text only informs us that a commandment was given to 'slaughter' a certain kind of cow. After the slaughter was completed (2:71), the narrative advances to the matter of the disputed killing (2:72).

DID THE JEWS HAVE A PRACTICE IN DISPUTED CASES OF KILLING WHICH INVOLVED A HEIFER?

From the Jewish Tanakh, we note the following:

Deuteronomy 21:1-9

1 If, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to possess, a body is found lying in open country, and it is not known who struck the person down, **2** then your elders and your judges shall come out to measure the distances to the towns that are near the body. **3** The elders of the town nearest the body shall take a heifer that has never been worked, one that has not pulled in the yoke; **4** the elders of that town shall bring the heifer down to a wadi with running water, **which is neither plowed nor sown**, and shall break the heifer's neck there in the wadi. **5** Then the priests, the sons of Levi, shall come forward, for the Lord your God has chosen them to minister to him and to pronounce blessings in the name of the Lord, and by their decision all cases of dispute and assault shall be settled. **6** All the elders of that town nearest the body shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the wadi, **7** and they shall declare: "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor were we witnesses to it. **8** Absolve, O Lord, your people Israel, whom you redeemed; do not let the guilt of innocent blood remain in the midst of your people Israel." Then they will be absolved of bloodguilt. **9** So you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from your midst, because you must do what is right in the sight of the Lord. [2]

There is Quranic support for the text highlighted in **bold** above. **2:71** "Verily she is a cow unyoked; she does not plough the soil nor water the tilth; whole and without mark"

However, in the explanation of the ritual we better understand the purpose behind the practice. An explanation is cited for the relevant verses from the resource, 'Matthew Henry Complete Commentary on the Whole Bible'

EXPLANATIONS: EXPIATION OF UNCERTAIN MURDER (Deuteronomy 21:1-9)

"Care had been taken by some preceding laws for the vigorous and effectual persecution of a wilful murderer ([Deuteronomy 19:11-13](#), &c.), the putting of whom to death was the putting away of the guilt of blood from the land; but if this could not be done, the murderer not being discovered, they must not think that the land was in no danger of contracting any pollution because it was not through any neglect of theirs that the murderer was unpunished; no, a great solemnity is here provided for the putting away of the guilt, as an expression of their dread and detestation of that sin.

I. The case supposed is that *one is found slain, and it is not known who slew him*, [Deuteronomy 21:1](#). **The providence of God has sometimes wonderfully brought to light these hidden works of darkness, and by strange occurrences the sin of the guilty has found them out, insomuch that it has become a proverb, *Murder will out*. But it is not always so; now and then the devil's promises of secrecy and impunity in this world are made good; yet it is but for a while: there is a time coming when secret murders will be discovered; the *earth shall disclose her blood (Isaiah 26:21)*, upon the inquisition which justice makes for it; and there is an eternity coming when those that escaped punishment from men will lie under the righteous judgment of God. And the impunity with which so many murders and other wickednesses are committed in this world makes it necessary that there should be a day of judgment, to *require that which is past*, [Ecclesiastes 3:15](#).**

II. Directions are given concerning what is to be done in this case.

Observe, 1. It is taken for granted that a diligent search had been made for the murderer, witnesses examined, and circumstances strictly enquired into, that if possible they might find out the guilty person; but if, after all, they could not trace it out, not fasten the charge upon any, then,

(1.) The *elders of the next city* (that had a court of three and twenty in it) were to concern themselves about this matter....

... (3.) They were to bring a heifer down into a rough and unoccupied valley, **and to kill it there**, [Deuteronomy 21:3,4](#). **This was not a sacrifice (for it was not brought to the altar), but a solemn protestation that thus they would put the murderer to death if they had him in their hands. The heifer must be one that had not drawn in the yoke**, to signify (say some) that the murderer was a son of Belial; it must be brought into a rough valley, to signify the horror of the fact, and that the defilement which blood brings upon a land turns it into barrenness. And the Jews say that **unless, after this, the murderer was found out, this valley where the heifer was killed was never to be tilled nor sown**. (4.) The elders were to *wash their hands in water* over the heifer that was killed, and to profess, not only that they had not shed this innocent blood themselves, but that they knew not who had ([Deuteronomy 21:6,7](#)), nor had knowingly concealed the murderer, helped him to make his escape, or been any way aiding or abetting....

...The priests were to pray to God for the country and nation, that God would be merciful to them, and not bring upon them the judgments which the connivance at the sin of murder would deserve. It

might be presumed that the murderer was either one of their city or was now harboured in their city; and therefore they must pray that they might not fare the worse for his being among them, Numbers 16:22. *Be merciful, O Lord, to thy people Israel, Deuteronomy 21:8*. Note, When we hear of the wickedness of the wicked we have need to cry earnestly to God for mercy for our land, which groans and trembles under it. We must empty the measure by our prayers which others are filling by their sins..." [3]

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Quran clearly cited an incident from the time of Prophet Moses^(pbuh) which included some details which the Jewish audience of 7th century Arabia would have most likely been familiar with. It included a case of a disputed killing where the practice of slaughtering a heifer was most likely well known. The Quran did not deem it appropriate for the purpose of the narrative to elaborate the details.

Whatever the practice involved, it seems highly likely that this was not a routine practice but included a portent which was manifested through it. Whether an actual body was roused from death or whether there is room for a metaphorical interpretation of how God manifests truth of murder will be open to discussion. Such details do not seem to be the purpose of the Quran to expound.

However, given some of the other themes in the Surah and the following verses, this incident was cited as a portent which was ignored by the people. Thenceforth, their hearts were hardened as clear manifested signs were rejected. It appears such portents clearly had been used in antiquity to provide clear proof (Itmam al-Hujjah). Rejections of such portents have resulted in hearts being sealed. This is certainly the theme that seems to be picked up in the following verses (2:74-75) and generic wisdom to be extracted from it. These transgressions on part of the Children of Israel were also being presented as a warning to the faithful in a tacit form of consolation if their message was rejected (2:75).

Furthermore, it is clear that despite an individual or groups intention to conceal a truth, God always retains the power to manifest it through His mysterious and unexpected ways, if He so wills. These are the underlying themes which appear to be the focus of the verses as opposed to the details of the incident of the disputed killing.

Related Articles:

- (1) [Itmam al-Hujjah - Completion of Proof](#)
- (2) [Understanding 'Kufr' \(Disbelief\) from a Quranic Perspective](#)

REFERENCES

[1] ASAD. M, **The Message of the Quran, Verse 2:73, Note 57**

[2] **New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, [online] <http://www.biblestudytools.com/nrs/deuteronomy/21.html> [Accessed 12th December 2011]**

Highlights marked in black bold are my own insertions. They have no bearing on the original text other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

[3] **Matthew Henry Commentary on the Whole Bible [online] <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/deuteronomy/21.html> [Accessed 12th December 2011]**

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