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There are several verses in the Holy Qur'an in which the members of the Household of the Prophet have been praised and acclaimed by the Almighty Allah and their position in the Islamic community has, thus, been clearly introduced to the Muslims. Among such verses is 'the verse of love' (mawaddah). What follows is a discussion on the meaning of this verse and its application.

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A Probe into the Purport and Application of the Verse of Love

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Abstract

There are several verses in the Holy Qur'an in which the members of the Household of the Prophet have been praised and acclaimed by the Almighty Allah and their position in the Islamic community has, thus, been clearly introduced to the Muslims. Among such verses is 'the verse of love' (mawaddah). What follows is a discussion on the meaning of this verse and its application.

According to the findings of this study, there are numerous narrations, from both Shi'a and the Sunni sources, that reveal the fact that the people referred to in this verse are Lady Fatima and the purified Imams from the Household of the Prophet Muhammad, and that the love of Ahl al-Bayt is a religious duty upon all Muslims.

Introduction

Replete with lofty ideological, ethical, and legal guidelines, the Holy Qur'an serves as a constitutional framework for all Muslims. In addition to guiding His creatures directly through the verses of the Qur'an, Allah has also directed them to His chosen servants and guides on the earth.

Another fact agreed upon by all Muslims is that the Holy Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, never asked for any compensation in return for the hardships and difficulties he experienced during his Prophetic mission. Yet, in verse 42:23, the Prophet is being instructed by Allah to inform the Muslims that he does not want any reward from them except that they should have love for his nearest kin.

Does this verse contradict the other verses in the Qur'an? What is the principal message intended to be conveyed by this verse? These and other similar questions shall be discussed in this paper.

The Verse of Love

Say, 'I do not ask of you any reward for it except the affection for [my] relatives.' (42:23)

The occasion of revelation of the Verse of Love

With regards to the occasion of revelation of this particular verse, a number of views have been expressed by the Shi'a and Sunni commentators of the Qur'an. However, it is crystal clear that a thorough consideration of the cases of revelation plays a decisive role in the correct understanding of a verse and in the identification of its application.

Many commentators have reported from Ibn 'Abbas on the authority of Sa'id bin Jubayr that after the migration of the Prophet to Medina and the establishment of the Islamic society, the Ansar came to see the Prophet and held talks with him concerning the administration of the newly founded Islamic state.

The Ansar proposed that in case of any kind of financial need in administering the Islamic government or running the affairs of the Islamic community, they would be more than willing to put all that they have at the disposal of the Prophet.

It was exactly at this particular moment that the Angel of Revelation, Gabriel, descended upon the Prophet revealing the following verse,

"Say, 'I do not ask of you any reward for it except the affection for [my] relatives.'" (42:23)

The Prophet communicated the verse to the Muslims and thereafter said, "Today onwards you should have love for my family."

The Ansar left the presence of the Prophet while submitting to this order of Allah and His Messenger.

However, a group of hypocrites accused the Prophet, saying that this verse was not a divine revelation; rather, it was a fabrication by the Prophet with the aim of subjugating the Muslims to the rule of his family after him.

Consequently, the following verse was revealed,

“Do they say, ‘He has fabricated a lie against Allah’? If so, should Allah wish He would set a seal on your heart, and Allah will efface the falsehood and confirm the truth with His words; indeed He knows well what is in the breasts.” (42:24)

The Holy Prophet immediately sent for them and recited this verse to them. The Ansar were disappointed with what happened and broke into tears. Thereafter, this verse was revealed:

“It is He who accepts the repentance of His servants, and excuses their misdeeds and knows what you do.” (42:25)

Again, the Prophet sent for them and gave them the glad tidings that Allah accepts the repentance of those who repent and answers their supplication.[1](#)

Explanation of key words

The key words crucial to the meaning of the Verse of Love are as follows:

Love (mawaddah)

Lexically the word ‘mawaddah’ derives from the root verb wadda meaning ‘to love something’.[2](#) In addition to the above meaning, Raghīb al-Isfahani also considers wadda to mean ‘to wish’. He maintains that wadda is used for both meanings and, in fact, the act of ‘wishing for something’ involves love and liking for that thing.[3](#)

Relatives (qurba)

Lexically, qurba is an infinitive verbal noun (masdar) which derives from qurb meaning ‘nearness’. According to some lexicographers, qurb is the opposite of bu’d, or ‘farness’. Qurb al-shay’ means ‘proximity to something’, and al-qarabah or al-qurba means ‘closeness to someone through blood relationship’.[4](#)

Acknowledging the meaning of the above derivatives of the word qurb, Raghīb al-Isfahani insists that the word is applicable to closeness in place, time, lineage, position as well as spiritual proximity.

The application of ‘al-qurba’

The most important question regarding the Verse of Mawaddah concerns identification of al-qurba. The answer to this question has been the major point of difference of opinion between the Shi‘a and Sunni mufasssirun of the Holy Qur’an.

Based on numerous proofs, the Shi‘ah believe that the individuals referred to by the word al-qurba are the members of the Household of the Prophet, the Ahl al-Bayt, the most distinct of them being ‘Ali, Fatima, Hasan, Husayn and the rest of the nine Divinely guided leaders from the progeny of Husayn.⁵

On the contrary, Sunni commentators present numerous interpretations that contradict the Shi‘a view, as will be mentioned shortly in our discussion.

In his book Nahj al-Haqq, ‘Allamah al-Hilli ranks the verse of mawaddah as the fourth verse from the Qur’an which establishes the divine authority (imamate) of Imam ‘Ali bin Abi Talib. Expounding on this verse, he relates a report from Ibn ‘Abbas who said, “When the verse of mawwadah was revealed, the Prophet was asked, ‘Who are these people whose love has become incumbent upon us?’ He replied, ‘Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Husayn.’” Thereafter, ‘Allamah al-Hilli states that the obligation to love someone necessitates the obligation of obeying him.⁶

Shi‘a narrations on the Verse of Mawaddah

Shi‘a scholars have cited numerous traditions from both Shi‘a and Sunni sources that attest that the Verse of Mawaddah was revealed in relation to the Ahl al-Bayt.⁷ Based on the Shi‘a sources, these traditions can be classified into three categories:

Ahl al-Bayt as the Instance of the Verse of Mawaddah

Imam al-Sajjad was once asked about the Verse of Mawaddah to which he replied, “It refers to our proximity – the Ahl al-Bayt – to the Prophet.”⁸

The People of the Cloak as the case of application of the Verse of Mawaddah

Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq says in this regard, “This verse was revealed concerning us the Ahl al-Bayt – the People of the Cloak.”⁹

The 12 Imams as the Case of Application of the Verse of Mawaddah

In other narrations, all the twelve Imams from the Ahl al-Bayt have been considered as the case of application of this verse as it has appeared in a tradition from Imam Muhammad al-Baqir.¹⁰

It is noteworthy that the above narrations are compatible with each other and do not contradict one

another. The first category of narrations generally identifies the Ahl al-Bayt as those referred to by the word al-qurba. The second and the third categories specify, in particular, the twelve holy Imams together with Lady Fatima as the individuals meant by the holy verse.

Sunni narrations on the Verse of Mawaddah

Numerous narrations have been recorded in the Sunni works of tafsir and hadith concerning the verse, as well as the individuals intended by the word al-qurba, such that thorough attention to them would clarify any doubt regarding the meaning of the verse.

In his annotations on the book Ihqaq al-Haqq, the late Ayatullah Mar'ashi Najafi names forty-six renowned Sunni scholars who have reported in their works the narrations concerning the verse through different chains of narration.

In his book Shawahid al-Tanzil, the well-known Sunni scholar Abu al-Qasim Hakim al-Hasakani records 22 traditions regarding the verse, most of which identify the Ahl al-Bayt as the case of application of this verse, and in some of them 'Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Husayn have particularly been regarded as the instances (masadiq) of the verse.[11](#)

Hereunder, we shall cite a number of narrations from the Shi'a and Sunni sources which clearly indicate that the people referred to by the word al-qurba are the Ahl al-Bayt:

Ahmad ibn Hanbal reports from Ibn 'Abbas through an uninterrupted chain of narration: "When the verse 'Say, I do not ask of you any reward for it except the affection for [my] relatives' was revealed, the companions of the Prophet asked, 'O the Messenger of Allah! Who are your relatives whose love has become incumbent upon us?' He answered, 'Ali, Fatima, and their two sons.' He repeated this three times."[12](#)

It is evident from this narration that the fact that al-qurba refers to the relatives of the Holy Prophet was known to all Muslims during that time or, at least to some of them, and as a result, their query was regarding the identification of these individuals.

Furthermore, given that the Prophet identified only four individuals from his relatives as those intended by the verse implies that, beside these four individuals, none of his other family members during his time are included in the verse; for in other than this case the Prophet would have certainly mentioned them.

Expounding on the verse, Jalal al-Din Suyuti in his famous work Al-Durr al-Manthur reports from Ibn 'Abbas that the Prophet said regarding this verse, "You should observe my right in relation to my household and have love for them because of me."[13](#)

In his commentary of the Qur'an, Ibn Jarir al-Tabari reports from Sa'id bin Jubayr, and based on another chain of narration from 'Umar bin Shu'ayb, that the people meant in this verse are the relatives of the

Prophet. [14](#)

Hakim al-Hasakani, the famous Sunni scholar of tafsir and hadith, narrates in his book Shawahid al-Tanzil from Abu Amamah al-Bahili that, “The Prophet of Allah said, ‘The Almighty Allah created the prophets from different trees, but he created me and ‘Ali from one tree. I am the root of that tree while ‘Ali is the branch of it; Fatima is the source of growth of that tree whereas Hasan and Husayn are its fruit and our followers (shi‘ah) are its leaves. If a person were to worship Allah between the [hills of] Safa and Marwa for a thousand years, and thereafter for a thousand years, and again for a thousand years after that ... but does not have our love [in his heart], Allah shall put him into the Fire on his face.’ Thereafter, the Prophet recited this verse: “Say, I do not ask of you any reward for it except the affection for [my] relatives.”” [15](#)

The purport of the Verse of Mawaddah

After elucidating the key words in the verse and identifying the individuals referred to by it, we shall now discuss the purport and meaning of the verse.

Despite the fact that we made use of the Sunni narrations for the identification of the individuals intended by the verse, the Sunni interpretation of the verse still differs from that of the Shi‘a.

We shall first discuss the Sunni point of view on the verse and thereafter we will present the correct interpretation of it.

The Sunni point of view

Regarding the verse, at least two views can be traced among the Sunni commentators:

The first view: The Messenger of Allah had blood relations with the Quraysh as he was also related to a number of other tribes through marriage. He had womb relation with the tribe of Bani al-Najjar in Madina and was also related to the tribe of Banu Sa‘d through his foster mother.

Thus, the meaning of the verse is this: ‘If you are not ready to recognise my right of prophethood, then at least observe my right of kinship to you and do not hurt me due to my family relationship with different tribes.’

A close look at this view shows that such a meaning does not go along with the context of the verse; for the reward is asked of those who have already acknowledged his apostleship, and in that case there is no room for such an interpretation.

If they have already been respecting him as the Messenger of Allah, then there was no need for them to hold him in esteem due to his kinship to them, since the respect that stems from accepting that his apostleship is superior to all other forms of respect.

As a matter of fact, this interpretation needs to be considered as a serious mistake committed by some commentators of the Qur'an, since it completely alters the meaning of the verse. [16](#)

The second view: According to this view, the reward for conveying the divine message is to have love for all those things which lead one to divine proximity. In other words, the meaning of the verse is: 'You should show your love to me by performing good deeds so that you may attain closeness to Allah.' [17](#)

This exposition also does not seem to be compatible with the apparent meaning of the verse; for in this case the verse would mean: 'That what is required of you is to have love for the obedience of Allah', whereas, in reality, it should say 'What is required of you is the obedience of Allah', and not the love of His obedience. [18](#)

2 .The Shi'a point of view

A close look at the verse clearly shows that Allah has specified love for the nearest kin as the reward of the apostleship of the Prophet Muhammad. Thorough consideration of the context of the verse and the narrations in this regard also lead us to the fact that love for the relatives of the Holy Prophet is a religious obligation on every Muslim, as it is evident from a narration of Imam Muhammad Baqir in which he says about the verse, "Love for the members of the household of the Prophet (Ahl al-Bayt) is indeed a divine obligation on the people in honour of Muhammad." [19](#)

Moreover, still a closer scrutiny of the verse reveals the fact that the love for the Ahl al-Bayt is a means that leads one to the acknowledgement of the divine leadership of the infallible Imams from the progeny of the Prophet as well as a backing for the accomplishment of the Prophetic mission.

The following explanation would help clarify the above conclusion:

A number of prophets have been quoted in the Qur'an as saying,

"I do not ask you any reward for it; my reward lies only with the Lord of all the worlds." [20](#)

On the other hand, the Qur'an quotes different assertions from the Prophet of Islam on the issue of asking for reward. It says on one occasion,

"Say, 'Whatever reward I may have asked you is for your own good. My [true] reward lies only with Allah, and He is witness to all things.'"21

In another verse, the Prophet is quoted to have said,

"Say, 'I do not ask you any reward for it, except that anyone who wishes should take the way to his Lord.'"22

Yet at another place it says,

“Say, ‘I do not ask you any reward for it, and I am no impostor.’”²³

If the above three verses are considered against the verse, then the following conclusion is derived: First, Prophet declines any kind of compensation; second he wants the reward only from a person who wishes to take the way to his Lord; third, he asserts that whatever reward he has asked of us is for our own benefit. And in the Verse of Mawaddah, the Prophet proclaims love for his relatives as the reward for his Prophetic mission.

In other words, the message of the Prophet to all Muslims is that he has asked them a reward whose benefit does not return to him; rather, it is entirely for their own good. It is something that would pave for them the way to Allah (swt). And it is obvious that the continuance of the path to reach Allah (swt) would only be conceivable if the torch lit by the Holy Prophet continues to burn after him under the custodian of his infallible successors and the divinely guided leaders who have all been from his holy progeny. This reality perfectly justifies this Prophetic instruction to have love and affection for his relatives.²⁴

Response to some doubts

It has been established up until here that according to the verse, the love for the Household of the Prophet – who are none but the infallible Imams from his progeny – is a religious obligation upon all Muslims. Below are some responses to doubts have been raised concerning the verse.

Doubt 1: The revelation of the Verse of Mawaddah in Mecca

Some Sunni commentators of the Qur’an reject the idea that the verse was revealed regarding the Ahl al-Bayt based on the argument that the Chapter Consultation (Surat al-Shura) was revealed in Mecca. They argue that this chapter was revealed during the Meccan period of the Prophetic mission wherein the marriage between ‘Ali and Fatima had not yet taken place and, therefore, Hasan and Husayn were not yet born. As a result, this verse could not have revealed in relation to these four individuals.²⁵

Response: Many commentators of the Qur’an have affirmed that although Surat al-Shura was revealed in Mecca, the verse and the three verses after it were revealed in Medina.²⁶ They have, moreover, reported from Ibn ‘Abbas and Qutadah who said, “This is a Meccan surah except for the four verses which were revealed in Medina, the first one being “Say, I do not ask of you any reward for it except the affection for [my] relatives ...”.²⁷

Doubt 2: Asking for reward controverts the norm of the Prophets

Asking for compensation by the Prophet stands in sharp contrast with the practice of the past prophets like Nuh, Hud, and Salih who openly declared, “I do not ask you any reward for it; my reward lies only with the Lord of all the worlds.”²⁸

Now, since our Prophet is the best among all the prophets, it befits him more not to ask for any reward.

Response: No prophet asked for any reward in return for his prophetic mission. The Prophet himself declined financial offer a couple of times from the infidels of Mecca during the early stages of his Prophetic mission as he also refused a similar offer from the Ansar after his migration to Medina.

It therefore becomes clear that the nature of the reward that the Prophet asked from the people was different to the one turned down by all the prophets in history, including our Holy Prophet Muhammad. The reward rejected by all prophets was the material and worldly form of reward, whereas the reward asked by our Prophet was spiritual in nature and for the good of the people themselves as indicated by the Qur'an,

“Say, ‘Whatever reward I may have asked you is for your own good....’” (34:47)

Doubt 3: Asking for reward gives rise to accusations against the Prophet

Asking for reward from the people makes the Prophet subject to accusations, as asking for reward in return for fulfilling a duty is not acceptable from an ordinary person, let alone the Prophet of Islam.

Response: Firstly, had the reward been a material and financial one which is normally given to somebody in return for accomplishing a task, then such an accusation could have been in place. However, the reward mentioned in the verse in return for the Prophetic mission eventually culminates in directing the people towards the Ahlul Bayt in matters related to religion and guidance, and in this case, the good of it does in no way return to the Prophet or the Ahlul Bayt, rather it is in the interest of the people themselves.

Based on the above explanation the Prophet would, therefore, be free from such accusations.

Furthermore, the addressees of the Verse of Mawaddah are believers who supposedly believe in the infallibility of the Prophet; thus, such accusations from them would be out of the question.

Secondly, if we assume that the Prophet could be subjected to such an accusation on the issue of asking for reward, how would we respond then in the case of such other Islamic tenets as khums, anfal, and the necessity of obedience to the Prophet which are – either completely or partially – specific to the Prophet himself?

Moreover, what other justification could be found for those narrations, from both Shi'a and Sunni sources, which apply the verse to the Ahlul Bayt?[29](#)

Conclusion

The following points are concluded from the above discussion:

1. The Verse of Mawaddah is among the contentious verses of the Qur'an between the Shi'a and Sunni exegetes (mufasssirin).

2. According to this verse, the Prophet decreed love for his relatives as the reward for his apostleship.
3. According to numerous Shi'a and Sunni narrations, the individuals referred to by this verse are the twelve Shi'a Imams.
4. The Prophet did not ask for any reward for himself. Such a reward was in the interest of the people themselves; due to the affinity of the love of Ahlul Bayt, the Muslims would become acquainted with the genuine teachings of Islam and attain spiritual perfection.

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- [3.](#) Raghib al-Isfahani, Mufradat Alfaz al-Qur'an, translation by Dr. Khosrawi, under the root verb wadda.
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