

The Sublime Quran: The misinterpretation of Chapter 4 Verse 34

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Abstract

For over 14 centuries, Muslim men have misinterpreted a verse of the Quran (4:34) to allow themselves to beat their wives. *The Sublime Quran*, the first critical English translation of the Quran by a woman, corrects this error and shows how it has created a contradiction not inherent in the Quran itself.

Keywords

Chapter 4 Verse 34, Quran, *Sublime Quran*, translation, women

Introduction

In response to feminist concerns that the Quran is often used to support the repression of women, I took up the challenge of providing a new interpretation that includes women's viewpoints. This challenge was long overdue after more than 14 centuries of male interpretations and translations. In the resulting translation, *The Sublime Quran*, I took the utmost care to produce a scholarly text, clearly grounded in the Arabic text, so that it could not be marginalized by the many Muslim men who erroneously believe that the Quran gives them a right to beat women. It is important to note that this approach to the issue of wife beating is the major way in which this translation differs from other contemporary translations into English. *The Sublime Quran (TSQ)* is the first critical English translation of the Quran by a woman.

In doing the translation, I found both a lack of internal consistency in previous English translations and failure to pay attention to women's points of view. While this absence from Quranic translation and commentary over the almost 1500 years since the revelation clearly needs to be remedied, it must be acknowledged that there are many men who have been supportive of the view that women and men are complementary, rather than unequal, within the human unity.

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Women who want women's viewpoints on the Quran to be included and to be given visibility are critical of those men and women who are not open to this understanding, but who, instead, oppose the notion that the Quran treats women as equal to men. Chapter 4, Verse 34 (4:34) of the Quran is frequently mobilized in support of attempts to render women subservient to men on the one hand and, on the other, as a major criticism of Islam on the grounds that it is against human rights and is sexist. This verse is frequently interpreted as saying that a husband can beat his wife after two stages of trying to discipline her. A popular translation among Muslims is that of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, the relevant part of which says, 'As to those women on whose part you fear disloyalty and ill-conduct [*nushuz*], admonish them (first). (Next) refuse to share their bed. (And last) beat them (lightly).'1

The Sublime Quran translation of the same verse reads as follows: 'Those (f) whose resistance [*nushuz*] you fear, then admonish them (f) and abandon them (f) in their sleeping place, then, go away from them (f).'2

In the introduction to the translation of *The Sublime Quran* as well as in this article, I address this issue and show how previous readings of 4:34 have been misinterpreted in ways corrected in the translation of *The Sublime Quran*.

Structure of the arguments

I present here the logical arguments as to why the root word,³ *daraba*, in its imperative form of *idrib* in Chapter 4 Verse 34 of the Quran has been misinterpreted when it is understood as 'beat them' – 'them' in this case being an Arabic feminine pronoun referring to wives. I explain the multiple meanings of the Arabic word *idrib*. I then refer to the *Sunnah*, the sayings and actions of the Prophet, from the *Sira* or biography of the Prophet.⁴ I counter two arguments used by Muslim jurists or *ulema* (that is, Muslim legal scholars versed in the *Shariah* or Islamic law) and commentators on the Quran, to justify their interpretation; namely, that *idrib* is a transitive verb and cannot be made intransitive and that only 'disobedient' (*nushuz*) wives are to be beaten. I end with arguments derived directly from Quranic verses. First, I identify three other words used in the Quran to mean 'beat' or 'strike'. Second, I list the 12 verses where the verb *daraba*, appears in the imperative *idrib* form. I then analyze two of the 12 occurrences in detail.

Through this analysis, I show how Muslim clerics or jurists, as well as commentators on the Quran, have added the word *lightly* in parentheses (which is not presented in the Arabic) in order to justify their interpretation of 'beat them' by saying, in effect, 'beat them' (meaning wives), but 'beat them lightly'.

In the Islamic tradition, the most conclusive arguments to prove or disprove a point require recourse to what the Quran says. This method is called interpreting the Quran based on the Quran. This is what I have done. I refer to Chapter 2, Verse 231 to show how the present erroneous interpretation of 4:34 and the verb *idrib* creates a contradiction not contained in the Quran itself. Verse 2:231 has been in the Quran since its revelation in the 7th century, as has 4:34. Yet this is the first time that the contradiction between them has

been shown. This analysis has been possible only because I have studied the Quran from a woman's perspective.

Finally, I point out that at least two rights accorded to women in the Quran, namely, in 2:231 and 24:6–9, are denied to many women in their everyday lives and practices because of the misinterpretation of *idrib* in 4:34.

Multiple meanings of the root word *daraba*

The root letters *d r b*, translated as 'beat' when accompanied by a preposition, have multiple meanings: with preposition *fi*, it means to travel; with the preposition '*ala*' it means to stomp; with the preposition '*an*' it means to turn something away; with the preposition *bayn* it means to set up between, to separate.

Without any modifying preposition (as is the case with 4:34) other meanings become possible, including to encompass; to cast, throw or fling upon the ground; to engender; to make a sign or to point with the hand; to prohibit, prevent or hinder from doing a thing one has begun; to seek glory; to avoid or shun; to be with shame; to be in a state of commotion; to be in a state between hope and fear; and to go away.

The *Sunnah*

For the Muslim, the Prophet is the living Quran. The Quran refers to the Prophet as a mercy to humanity, the model whose example should be followed. Based on this, it is clear that he would have carried out any and all of the commands (imperative forms of the verb) in the Quran that were revealed to him. Yet, according to centuries of translations and interpretations of the Quran, we find an exception in God's command in 4:34. We know from the earliest biographies of the Prophet's life that he never beat anyone. If the interpretation of 4:34 as 'beat them (f)' was accurate, this would mean that the Prophet did not carry out God's command. This in itself suggests that 'beat them' is a misinterpretation. He clearly believed that it was not within his *Sunnah* to do such a thing. Therefore, he showed by his behavior that 4:34 and the use of the word *daraba* means 'go away from them (f)' and let the emotions subside, rather than 'to beat'.

Judging from the way he has been portrayed, the Prophet knew innately that it was wrong to harm another human being. He knew that according to 16:126 (a verse that was revealed before 4:34), one is commanded to chastise with the same chastisement that one has received from the person one is chastising. 'And if you chastise, then chastise with the like of that with which you were chastised' (16:126). Therefore, conceivably if a husband harms his wife by beating her, according to 16:126, his wife would be allowed to chastise her husband in the same way. The Prophet would have known that if a husband were to beat his wife, she would have recourse to beating her husband. In addition, the Prophet's respect for the female gender was legendary. This included not only his wives, the mothers of the believers, but his daughters as well. He had a very special relationship with his daughter Fatima, the only one of his daughters to survive him. How could he beat his wives and not consider that someone might beat one of his beloved daughters? Moreover, he knew that marriage was based on mutual respect and love. The

Quran often tells husbands and wives to consult on issues with each other. It would be unfair and unjust to think that God would have revealed a verse that allowed husbands to beat their wives instead of withdrawing for a short period of time and allowing the anger to subside. Then they would be able once again to consult with one another.

Jurists or ulema argue that *daraba* is a transitive verb

We are told by jurists that the word 'beat' in this verse (4:34) is a transitive verb. That means it can only take a direct object. If it means 'to go away from them', the verb becomes intransitive, taking an indirect object ('**from** them'). There are two arguments against this rationalization of an immoral act.

First of all we have to ask: When this verse was revealed to the Prophet, who was unlettered, and he heard the word *idrib*, did he sit back and discuss with himself whether the verb that God was revealing was a transitive or an intransitive one? No! By his behavior, we know that he treated it as intransitive – when there was domestic unrest in his family, he went away from his wives. Second, we are talking about translation, not about the original Arabic. When you translate from an original text into a target language, you have to go with the rules of the target language. There are many times when an English word requires an indirect object whereas the Arabic word does not. Do you then distort the meaning? No. You observe the rules of the target language.

There are at least three other times in the English translation where a transitive verb has to become intransitive to make sense. They are 12:107, 24:38, and most clearly in 83:3 where people are told that when they sell goods, they should be fair: 'When they want to measure *for* them or weigh *for* them.' The preposition 'for' does not appear in the Arabic.

In Persian or Urdu whether you say, 'beat them (f)' or 'go away from them (f)', the form of the verb does not change. In Urdu 'go away from them' is *un ko choro* and 'beat them' is *un ko moro*. In Persian it would be: '*On-ha ra bezanid*' for 'beat them (f)' or '*on-ha ra tark konid*' for 'go away from them (f)'. Therefore, this is only an issue when English is the target language.

Only *nushuz* women to be beaten

Jurists also claim that not all wives should be beaten. The 'beating' is only given to a wife whose *nushuz* her husband fears. The jurists explain *nushuz* as 'disobedience'. Yet, *nushuz* does not literally mean 'disobedience'.

Using the better interpretation – resistance – for *nushuz*, we see that, while in 4:34 the Quran says: 'husbands who fear "resistance" [*nushuz*] on the part of their wives', in 4:128 the Quran says: 'wives who fear "resistance" [*nushuz*] on the part of their husbands', i.e. exactly the same wording for husbands and wives. In the truly fair and just practices that the Quran always presents, whatever the translation of the word in regard to a wife must be the same for a husband. If *nushuz* is interpreted as meaning disobedient, then it must apply to both cases, a disobedient wife and/or a disobedient husband. Are there Muslim men willing to say that they are 'disobedient to their wives'?

The Quran

Three other words used in the Quran that mean beat or strike

We have to ask ourselves: Why did not the Prophet beat his wives if it really was a command in the Quran? When the verse 4:34 was revealed to him, his behavior in response to a situation of domestic strife suggests that he did not consider it to mean ‘beat them’ in reference to his wives. The answer might possibly be because the Quran uses three other words for strike or beat, namely in 28:15, 38:41 and 51:29.

In 28:15 Moses ‘strikes’ a young man with his fist. The root letters are not *d r b*, which we know also means ‘to strike’, but *w k z*. In the case of 38:44, the command to Job to ‘strike’ with his foot, the root letters used are *r k d* and not *d r b* which can also mean ‘to stamp’ or ‘to stomp.’ In 51:29, when Sarah, the wife of Abraham was told she would have a child, she ‘strikes’ her face on purpose, the root letters being *s k k* and not *d r b* which as has been stated also means ‘to strike’ or ‘to smite’.

Just as other Arabic words, which may mean ‘to strike’, have multiple meanings, so the root letters *d r b* may mean other than ‘to strike’. In this case, it can mean ‘to go away’.

Daraba in its imperative form of idrib appears 12 times in the Quran

Of the 12 times the root letters *d r b* appear as a command in the Quran, it occurs twice to angels in 8:12, and once each in 18:32, 18:45 and 36:13; three are followed by the word for ‘parable’ so they become the command: ‘And propound to them the parable . . .’ (18:32, 18:45 and 36:13). In addition, it appears four times as commands to Moses: ‘Strike the rock with thy staff . . .’ (2:60, 7:160, 20:77 and 26:63). The command is given once to the Children of Israel in 2:73 in the tenth time that it is used ‘to strike with some of it’, referring to a dead man being struck by some of a dead cow.

The eleventh use of the imperative form of *daraba*, namely *idrib*, relates to the story of Job (38:44). This verse says, ‘And take in thy hand a bundle of rushes and strike with it and fail not thy oath’ (38:44). The twelfth usage of *d r b* in the imperative form is in 4:34, misinterpreted as allowing husbands to ‘strike, beat, hit, chastise or spank’ a *nushuz* wife.

Job, his oath and the word (lightly) added by commentators to 4:34

As the verse is not specific in regard to Job, commentators went to the Old Testament to find more detail. At some point while Job is patiently bearing his afflictions, the Old Testament suggests that Job’s wife tells him to end his suffering by killing himself.

Quranic commentators then embellished the story, saying that, in desperation for money, Job’s wife, Rahmah (her name means mercy), sold her hair in order to buy bread for Job. Before she was able to return to her home and Job, Satan went to Job and lied to him in order to increase Job’s grief and anguish, by saying that Job’s wife had committed adultery and as a punishment, the villagers had cut her hair.⁵ Rahmah returns home, but before she had a chance to explain that she had sold her hair in order to buy food, Job, seeing that her hair had been cut, became angry and swore an oath to beat her with one

hundred strokes. Later, when God healed Job and returned his children and his fortune to him, Job became reluctant to carry out his oath. Muslim commentators say that the angel Gabriel appeared to Job and related Rahmah's innocence to him. However, in spite of her innocence, Gabriel told Job that he must honor his oath by striking his wife *lightly* with a bundle of one hundred rushes.

The injustice of this story is clear to all but the commentators and interpreters. They see no contradiction in Gabriel telling Job that it is more important to carry out his oath, even if it means beating an innocent person *lightly*, than, for instance, expiating for his unfulfilled oath as another verse in the Quran allows. Rahmah had been an exemplary wife. Once Job lost all of his material wealth, she did not leave him as his other two wives had done, but, instead, began earning money as a cleaning woman in order to be able to provide food for him. When others in the village found Job's state so disgusting that they were not prepared to help Rahmah to carry him to a garbage heap, she remained faithful throughout his long ordeal and worked hard to provide food for him, only to learn that Gabriel had reminded Job of his oath so that he must 'beat' Rahmah *lightly* with a bundle of one hundred rushes.

To treat any aspect of this story as rationalization for *idrib* in 4:34 being interpreted as 'beat' (*lightly*) goes against the first few words of 4:34. *The Sublime Quran* translation reads as follows: 'Men are supporters of wives because God gave him an advantage over others and because they spent of their wealth' (4:34). That is, this verse applies only to a husband who financially supports his family. In the case of Job, his wife Rahmah was the sole financial support of the family at the time that he swore his oath so the rest of the verse does not apply to their situation and it is against the understanding of the verse to apply it to them.

One cannot add the word '(lightly)' as justification for continuing to allow husbands to beat their wives because they are only supposed to do it '*lightly*' because this stems from an embellishment of a story that is not part of the Quran.

In conclusion to the story of Job, the author of *The Old Testament: An Islamic Perspective* adds: 'Nevertheless there will always remain a suspicion that the original oral tradition [of the story of Rahmah and Job] was lost or distorted and the later Muslim commentators, unable to retrieve it, adopted the story of Job's wife from the later Jewish Job cycle to meet their exegetic needs' (Crook, 2006: 746).

Using the Quran to interpret the Quran

It is the misinterpretation of the word *idrib* in 4:34 that *The Sublime Quran* translation challenges. It emphasizes that this misinterpretation must be corrected to be consistent with the way the Prophet understood it through his behavior when facing exactly the same situation. Therefore, it is not a personal interpretation, but one that calls for a return to the *Sunnah*.

The misinterpretation is not in the Arabic of the Quran, the eternal Word of God revealed to the Prophet; instead, it is how commentators over the centuries have interpreted the Word of God that is at issue. In doing so, they have forgotten another verse of the Quran, namely, 'So give good tidings to My servants, those who listen to the saying of the Quran and follow the fairest of it' (39:17–18). In other words, we have to choose

the interpretation that best suits the general Quranic principles and rules, not a meaning that contradicts them.

Now we come to the point that leads some Muslims to dismiss *The Sublime Quran* translation as feminist, in order to ignore the arguments it presents. In order to address these arguments, it makes use of the most conclusive arguments to prove or disprove a point; i.e. it interprets the Quran based on the Quran. It considers two premises: Islam encourages marriage and discourages divorce. The Prophet has said that marriage is half of faith. He also said that divorce is deplorable.

We read in Chapter 2 Verse 231: ‘When you divorce wives, and they (f) are about to reach their (f) term, then hold them (f) back honorably or set them (f) free honorably; but hold them (f) not back by injuring them so that you commit aggression.’ In other words, the Quran is telling husbands not to harm their wives who agree to being set free, not to hold them back by injuring them. The word ‘injuring’ (*dirar*) also means hurt, harm, use force, exceed the limits or commit aggression.

Therefore, using the Quran to explain the Quran, we see a divergence between 4:34 and 2:231. Jurists have created a contradiction that is not contained in the Quran by encouraging divorce and discouraging marriage. Their logic would imply that we can conclude that a Muslim woman who wants a divorce must be set free without her husband injuring, hurting, or using force against her, but a Muslim woman who wants to remain married does so under the threat of being beaten!

If Muslim wives knew their rights would any want to stay married under such circumstances? Is this encouraging marriage? Does this make sense? 4:34 as presently interpreted contradicts 2:231. How can we eliminate this contradiction? There is a very simple solution: revert the interpretation back to how the Prophet understood it in his daily practice.

What happens in the real world? An example illuminates how untenable such interpretations are. A Muslim wife, after many attempts to help her husband to manage his inappropriate anger, anger that most often is taken out against her, is told by her husband that he will divorce her. She agrees. He is displeased with her answer. In his anger, he does not at that moment remember that according to 2:231 he is not to hold back a wife who agrees to be set free. Emboldened by the misinterpretation of 4:34, believing himself to be both judge and jury, he beats her. The battered wife who becomes the victim of his anger is then afraid to speak out again as this last instance may have caused her such extreme injuries that, in fear for her life, she has to seek refuge in a shelter for battered women.

Another example from the Quran as to why the word *idrib* in 4:34 does not mean ‘to beat’ is to be found in 24:6–9. These verses state that when a husband accuses his wife of something – and there are no witnesses other than himself – the testimony of the husband should be four testimonies sworn to God that he is sincere and a fifth that the curse of God be on him if he has been the one who lies. ‘And it will drive off the punishment from her’, the Quran continues, ‘if she bears witness with four testimonies sworn to God that he is the one who lies, and the fifth, that the anger of God be on her if he has been among the ones who are sincere.’ The Quran says that the oaths of the wife prevail and any harm is averted from her.⁶

Now let us imagine the same situation as the one described in 4:34. Before a wife has a chance to take advantage of her right given in the Quran in 24:6–9, her husband accuses

her of something, say, 'flirting with another man', without witnesses other than himself and beats her. She becomes a victim of her husband's violence, perhaps ending up in a shelter. Now, as a victim, she no longer has the will to defend herself and instead assumes that she is in the wrong; that she deserves to be beaten; and that God has sanctioned her being beaten because somehow she is at fault. Thus the wrong interpretation of *idrib* as meaning 'beat' instead of 'go away' has turned into myths, displacing the two real rights that the Quran has given women:

First, that a wife who agrees to her husband divorcing her cannot be held back by injuring her, protects a wife who wants to be set free. This is a right she is given in the Quran – not to be hurt! When *idrib* in 4:34 is interpreted as beat, this reality becomes a myth as the example has shown.

Second, it is a real right that the verses in 24:6–9 allow a wife who is accused by her husband without any witnesses other than himself to defend herself against the accusation. God and humanity accept her defence, but because of her husband's misinterpretation of 4:34, another reality in the Quran for women is turned into a myth.

In addition, in both cases of the use of the word *idrib*, interpreted as meaning 'beat', Muslim translators and interpreters make it preferable for a wife to agree to a divorce because then she cannot be harmed, instead of remaining married because remaining married carries the threat of being beaten. In doing so, they are commanding *munkar* and prohibiting *ma'ruf*, i.e. commanding immoral behavior and prohibiting moral behavior, the definition of a hypocrite in 9:67.

Conclusion

I have been asked many times: How can you go against tradition and over 1400 years history of commentary? I believe that if we study Islamic history, after the time of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs in the 7th century, we Muslims have had uninterrupted rule by tyrants and dictators with the exception of a few years of a pious ruler. Does that mean that we cannot go against history and demand pious and benevolent rulers? No, of course not. My response is that the minute that each individual member of the Muslim community or *ummah* gains consciousness of something wrong being done in the name of God, in the name of Islam, he or she has the responsibility to speak out.

Notes

1. Words added in parentheses do not appear in the Arabic, but have been added by the translator.
2. In addition to proof of the misinterpretation of 4:34, when words in a verse refer directly to a woman/women or wife/wives and the corresponding pronouns such as (they, them, those), I have placed an (f) after the word to indicate that the word refers to the feminine gender specifically. Otherwise, in the Arabic language (as in Spanish), the masculine pronoun may be used generically to include both male and female human beings.
3. For non-Arabic speakers, it is important to note that Arabic words are generally based on a root of three consonants. Vowels, prefixes and suffixes are often omitted from written texts. However, they are used with the root letters to create specific meanings. This means that each set of root letters can lead to a vast number of words, which are often understood in the context

of a sentence or paragraph. However, this can lead to misinterpretations and debates about interpretations.

4. In regard to 4:34, the *Hadith* show arguments on both sides as to whether or not the Prophet said that husbands were allowed to beat their wives and, therefore, I make no reference to the *Hadith* and use the Quran to interpret the Quran.
5. In addition, translators and commentators have erred in another way. Satan said that Rahmah had committed adultery and, as a result, the villagers cut her hair. Job believes this lie and swears an oath to beat her. The Quran is clear that the punishment for adultery is to scourge both the adulteress and adulterer one hundred strokes, but only after four witnesses have actually witnessed the act (24:2 and 24:4). Then where did the belief in stoning them come from? It comes from a *Hadith* that refers to Jewish tradition.

The *Hadith* says that a Jewish man went to the Prophet and said that two people in his community had committed adultery. He asked what their punishment should be. The Prophet asked him, 'What does your Book [i.e. the Torah] say?' The Jewish man responded, 'It says they should be stoned.' The Prophet said, 'Then follow what your Book tells you to do.'

6. Notice the nuance in the Quranic language between what the husband must swear an oath to: 'the curse of God be upon him if he lies', whereas the wife must swear an oath that 'the anger of God be upon her if her husband is sincere'. This shows the great respect that God and the Quran have for women.

Reference

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Towards a Babel ontology

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Abstract

This article presents a few issues in the making of our film *A Long History of Madness* that pertain to the 'Babylonian'. Spoken in 12 languages, ranging across six centuries, and shot in five countries, the film possesses an inherent Babylonism. It makes a case

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