

AN OVERVIEW OF THE DIFFERENT COMMENTARIES REGARDING THE PAGAN PRACTICES MENTIONED IN 5:103

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The commentators are unanimous that Sura Al Maidah is a *Madani* sura and according to some, was revealed as a whole. It is also accepted that it was the last Sura that was revealed to the Holy Prophet (SAW) and thus narrations from both sunni and shi'I sources say it is the abrogating chapter and not the abrogated.

The verse under discussion, verse 103, is as follows;

مَا جَعَلَ اللَّهُ مِنْ بَحِيرَةٍ وَلَا سَائِيَةٍ وَلَا وَصِيلَةٍ وَلَا حَامٍ^١ وَلَكِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا يَفْتَرُونَ عَلَى اللَّهِ الْكَذِبَ^٢ وَأَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ

"God has not established baḥīrah, or sā'ibah, or waṣīlah, or ḥām. But those who disbelieve fabricate lies against God, and most of them do not understand."

In general this verse is talking about the pagan practice of forbidding the consumption, riding and milking of some types of animals and emphasizing that this law is not from Allah (SWT). Rather, these polytheists had actually made up these laws themselves and ascribed them to Allah (SWT). There is a plethora of opinions regarding the identity of these animals and the different views shall be presented below.

Baḥīrah

The various opinions that exist as to what was meant by Bahirah;

- 1) A female camel who had borne five offspring¹
- 2) A female camel who had borne five offspring, the fifth of which had to be a male²
- 3) A female camel who had borne five offspring, the fifth of which had to be a female³
- 4) The Daughter of Sa'ibah⁴

¹ Qurtubi, Al-Jami' li-Ahkam al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 335.

² Fakhr Razi, Tafsir al-Kabir, Volume 16 Page 447; Allama Tabrisi, Majma al-Bayaan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 3 Page 389; Syed Qutb, Fi Zilal al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 989-991; Syed Abul A'la Mawdudi, Tafheem al-Quran

³ Ayatullah Nasir Makarim Shirazi, Tafseer Namuneh, Volume 5 Page 103-105; Allama Muhammad Hussain Tabataba'i, Al Mizan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 156-159; Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir Ibn Abbas

⁴ Allama Muhammad Hussain Tabataba'i, Al Mizan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 156-159

- 5) That camel whose milk is consecrated to idols and whom no human may milk⁵

Regardless of its definition, it is said they would split the ears of such an animal and let it wander freely and not kill it. Baḥīrah comes from the root of *Bahr* which means expanding and spreading. The Arabs would call the ocean *Bahr* because of its vastness and this animal was called Baḥīrah because of the wide hole in its ear.⁶ They even refrained from riding it and it was never driven away from any water or pasture. Even if a tired traveler would come across it, he would not ride it. Its fur was not shorn. Women were forbidden to taste even a drop of its milk or to get any benefit from it – its milk and benefits were reserved for men until it died; when it died, men and women joined in eating it.⁷

Sa'ibah

The various opinions that exist as to what was meant by Sa'ibah;

- 1) A female camel that was consecrated to the gods voluntarily by its owner as a supplicatory offering for overcoming illness, for protection on a journey, or as a means of giving thanks for some good fortune⁸
- 2) A camel which had brought forth twelve off springs⁹
- 3) A she-camel that was freed for idols. Usually, a man freed whatever he wished from among his property; then he brought it to custodians of the idols and they fed wayfarers of its milk and so on.¹⁰
- 4) A Male camel freed for the idols¹¹
- 5) A she-camel that gave birth to ten females consecutively, without any male calf coming in between¹²

Sa'ibah comes from the root *Seb* which means running of water or freedom in walking. They left that camel free so that no one would ride on it. They did not shear its fur, and except for a guest, no one could drink its milk.¹³ Based on the 4th opinion, the custodians of the idols would offer it to male travelers who passed by – excluding women. The animals offered were also male and never female. When these died, both men and women shared its meat.¹⁴

Waṣīlah

The various opinions as to what waṣīlah means;

⁵ Suyuti, Syed Qutb, Fi Zilal al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 989-991

⁶ Ayatullah Nasir Makarim Shirazi, Tafseer Namuneh, Volume 5 Page 103-105

⁷ Allama Muhammad Hussain Tabataba'i, Al Mizan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 156-159; Syed Qutb, Fi Zilal al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 989-991

⁸ Fakhr Razi, Tafsir al-Kabir, Volume 16 Page 447; Allama Tabrisi, Majma al-Bayaan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 3 Page 389; Syed Abul A'la Mawdudi, Tafheem al-Quran

⁹ Ayatullah Nasir Makarim Shirazi, Tafseer Namuneh, Volume 5 Page 103-105

¹⁰ Allama Muhammad Hussain Tabataba'i, Al Mizan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 156-159; Fakhr Razi, Tafsir al-Kabir, Volume 16 Page 447; Syed Qutb, Fi Zilal al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 989-991, Suyuti, Tafsir al-Jalalayn, Page 127

¹¹ Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir Ibn Abbas

¹² Mawdudi; Allama Muhammad Hussain Tabataba'i, Al Mizan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 156-159

¹³ Allama Muhammad Hussain Tabataba'i, Al Mizan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 156-159

¹⁴ Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir Ibn Abbas

- 1) A female camel who had given birth to many female offspring —particularly valuable for their milk¹⁵
- 2) A female camel who had given birth to a male and a female offspring¹⁶
- 3) A lamb which could bring forth a child for seven times¹⁷
- 4) A lamb which could bring forth twins.¹⁸
- 5) When a sheep had delivered seven times, they used to check the seventh birth. If it were male, they used to immolate it and its meat was shared by men and women. If it were female, women would not be allowed to benefit from it until the animal died. When the animal died, both men and women shared its meat. If it were a twin delivery, male and female, both were spared for the benefit of men only, until their death. When the animal died, both men and women shared their meat.¹⁹
- 6) A she-camel that gave birth to two she-camels consecutively²⁰
- 7) A female sheep being a twin of a male sheep²¹
- 8) If a sheep gives birth to a female, they (those in charge of the idols) took it. Should it give birth to a male, they would slaughter it as an offering to their deities. Now if she gave birth to twins: a male and a female, they would say that the female had spared its brother and they would not slaughter the male as an offering²²
- 9) A goat which brought forth ten female kids in five pregnancies, without there being any male among them. Then they said she has joined. Then whatever was born to her after that, was reserved for men, the women being excluded from it.²³

Waṣīlah comes from the root *wasl* meaning interconnectedness.

Ḥām

The different opinions as to what Ḥām means;

- 1) A male camel who had sired many offspring²⁴
- 2) A male camel whose offspring had sired another generation of offspring²⁵
- 3) A male animal which had been used for fecundating female animals of the same kind for ten times and each time a new progeny was brought forth from its seed.²⁶

¹⁵ Suyuti, Tafsir al-Jalalayn, Page 127

¹⁶ Fakhr Razi, Tafsir al-Kabir, Volume 16 Page 447

¹⁷ Ayatullah Nasir Makarim Shirazi, Tafseer Namuneh, Volume 5 Page 103-105

¹⁸ Ayatullah Nasir Makarim Shirazi, Tafseer Namuneh, Volume 5 Page 103-105

¹⁹ Allama Muhammad Hussain Tabataba'i, Al Mizan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 156-159; Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir Ibn Abbas

²⁰ Syed Qutb, Fi Zilal al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 989-991

²¹ Syed Qutb, Fi Zilal al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 989-991

²² Syed Qutb, Fi Zilal al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 989-991; Allama Muhammad Hussain Tabataba'i, Al Mizan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 156-159; Allama Tabrisi, Majma al-Bayaan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 3 Page 389; Syed Abul A'la Mawdudi, Tafheem al-Quran

²³ Allama Muhammad Hussain Tabataba'i, Al Mizan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 156-159

²⁴ Suyuti, Tafsir al-Jalalayn, Page 127

²⁵ Fakhr Razi, Tafsir al-Kabir, Volume 16 Page 447; Allama Muhammad Hussain Tabataba'i, Al Mizan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 156-159; Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir Ibn Abbas; Syed Abul A'la Mawdudi, Tafheem al-Quran

²⁶ Ayatullah Nasir Makarim Shirazi, Tafseer Namuneh, Volume 5 Page 103-105; Allama Muhammad Hussain Tabataba'i, Al Mizan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 156-159; Syed Qutb, Fi Zilal al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 989-991; Syed Abul A'la Mawdudi, Tafheem al-Quran

Ḥām is the *ism fail* (active participle) of *Himayat* meaning supporter. It could also mean being an obstacle²⁷. It could graze freely and could not be ridden or made to carry any burden²⁸. Nothing was loaded on it, nor was it prevented from water or pasture.²⁹ It could not be stopped from copulating with any she-camel that came its way. When it would get too old or die, its meat was shared by men and women.³⁰

These sacred camels would often be marked by slit ears, so that people who came upon them would be aware of their sacred status and not disturb them.³¹

Although there is all this difference in meanings of these names, there is a strong probability that it portrays the variation in different tribes' usage and customs, because such superstitions were wide spread among ancient barbaric nations.³²

These practices are reported to be some of the first ways in which the pre-Islamic Arabs deviated from the monotheistic religion of Abraham.³³ The pagans would ascribe these superstitious beliefs to Allah (SWT) and would say that these laws are from Him. According to some commentators, this tradition was invented by 'Amr ibn Luhayy and his followers³⁴

Although the literal translation of the beginning of the verse would be "*Allah (SWT) has not made...*", it is clear that this negation is related to the attributes of the cattle and not the cattle themselves. This is because, without a doubt, the cattle themselves are creatures of Allah (SWT). What is being negated is the rulings or laws which were ascribed to these cattle.³⁵

Regarding the final clause of the verse, "*and most of them do not understand*," It means that their positions differ in this fabrication; most of them fabricate against Allah (SWT) what they do and they do not understand; while the remaining small group do understand the Truth, knowing well that what they ascribe to Allah (SWT) is mere fabrication. These are the leaders whose words are listened to and who manage the affairs of the masses; and they are the obstinate and stubborn ones.³⁶ Also, most of the people would not ponder on what they were imitating from their forefathers and leaders.³⁷

Some commentators have taken this verse to argue against the claims of the *Mujbira* who believed that Allah (SWT) is the creator of belief and disbelief, of good and evil, and of idol worship. The

²⁷ Ayatullah Nasir Makarim Shirazi, Tafseer Namuneh, Volume 5 Page 103-105

²⁸ Fakhr Razi, Tafsir al-Kabir, Volume 16 Page 447

²⁹ Allama Muhammad Hussain Tabataba'i, Al Mizan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 156-159

³⁰ Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir Ibn Abbas

³¹ Syed Hussein Nasr, The Study Quran

³² Allama Muhammad Hussain Tabataba'i, Al Mizan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 156-159

³³ Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabarri, Jami' al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 7 Page 56

³⁴ Fakhr Razi, Tafsir al-Kabir, Volume 16 Page 447; Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir Ibn Abbas

³⁵ Allama Muhammad Hussain Tabataba'i, Al Mizan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 156-159

³⁶ Allama Muhammad Hussain Tabataba'i, Al Mizan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 156-159

³⁷ Ayatullah Nasir Makarim Shirazi, Tafseer Namuneh, Volume 5 Page 103-105; Suyuti, Tafsir al-Jalalayn, Page 127

verse clearly states that this kind of worship is not from Allah (SWT). Thus the *Mujbira* are actually belying Allah (SWT).³⁸

Regarding why the Qur'an so vehemently condemned this practice several reasons are given by commentators. The main reason why Allah (SWT) disliked this act was because firstly, not using the blessings of Allah (SWT) is a form of ungratefulness and these animals are blessings from Allah (SWT). Secondly, after all the hardships that these animals went through, the pagans refused to feed them or treat them kindly but left them alone. Hence this was another reason for their being reproached. Furthermore, it is known through some narrations that they would do these acts for the pleasure of their idols or as a form of gift to the idols.³⁹ Syed Qutb, on the other hand, sees this action of theirs as a direct attack on monotheism (see below).

Another reason given by some commentators is that the purpose of creation of man is worship and the purpose of creation of these animals is to help man in this journey of his. These laws that the polytheists had created were taking man away from his purpose and was forbidding something that Allah (SWT) had made as a tool to aid man.⁴⁰

Social approach to tafsir

Syed Qutb's tafsir, known as *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*, is one of the most influential tafasir which takes a societal approach. Regarding the verse under discussion, after mentioning the various opinions about the different types of animals (see above), he explicitly says that these were myths. He then goes on to espouse that there are no limits when myth and personal desires are the ultimate arbiters. Endless rituals will emerge with continuous omissions and additions – this was the case in pre-Islamic Arabia. Based on this understanding, he states that this phenomenon can take place anywhere and anytime, once human conscience deviates from pure monotheism. The appearance may differ, but the essence of ignorance remains the same.⁴¹

Syed Qutb, on many occasions, discusses the consequence of associating partners with Allah (SWT) in promulgation of laws. Under verse 137 of Sura An'aam (6), he propounds that the problem which Islam faces today is the fact that certain tyrannical powers usurp God's authority and give themselves the right to promulgate laws, making certain allowances and restrictions concerning people's lives, fortunes, wealth and children. It is indeed the same problem the Qur'an addresses with such clear and decisive statements, establishing a direct link between it and the concept of Godhead and people's submission to God.

The main battle which Islam fought to establish itself was not against atheism, nor did it aim at the mere adoption of certain Islamic practices. Furthermore, the fight was not against social or moral corruption. These battles came later, after the battle seeking to establish the very existence of faith had been won. The main battle Islam fought to establish itself was over sovereignty and to whom it belonged. This was indeed the battle fought in Makkah, when Islam was striving to establish the faith, making no reference to its law or social system. The aim of that effort was to establish in people's minds that sovereignty cannot be claimed by a Muslim, nor can a Muslim accept that it

³⁸ Sheikh Tusi, *Al-Tibyan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, Volume 4 Page 37; Abul-Futouh Razi, *Rawd al-Jinan wa Rawh al-Janan fi Tafsir al-Quran*, Volume 7, Page 175.

³⁹ Ayatullah Nasir Makarim Shirazi, *Tafseer Namuneh*, Volume 5 Page 103-105

⁴⁰ Fakhr Razi, *Tafsir al-Kabir*, Volume 16 Page 447

⁴¹ Syed Qutb, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*, Volume 6 Page 989-991

belongs to anyone other than God. When this basic concept of faith was truly established in the minds of the small Muslim community in Makkah, God facilitated for them its implementation when they migrated to Madinah.

Such blurred, confused concepts and the social traditions they establish to weigh heavily on the masses are not limited to the types known in bygone ignorant or jāhiliyyah societies. We find clearer versions of them in modern societies, in the form of customs and traditions which people feel to be inescapable, even though they are very hard to observe. Take, for example, the case of fashion and other observances which impose themselves on people, costing them at times what they cannot afford, taking a high position on their list of concerns and ultimately corrupting their moral values and whole lives. Nevertheless, people feel that they must comply with all these dictates: a particular fashion for morning, another for afternoon, and a different one for evening. One fashion imposes short dress, another dictates tight clothes, and a third makes people wear that which is ridiculous. In addition, there is an endless variety of cosmetics, and hair styles, etc. Who imposes all this humiliating subjugation and who lends it support and backing? When we look for the facts we find that it is backed by the major fashion houses, manufacturers and dressmakers, as well as the usurious banks and finance companies who lend money to the industry in order that they themselves win a large share of the profits.⁴²

Returning to the verse under discussion, he says that Jahilliyyah was not a period of time but was a state of mind. The mind itself is usually influenced by desires therefore it is necessary to be controlled by faith. He then goes on to say that he has personally seen in the Egyptian countryside numerous forms of myth, in which certain types of animals are consecrated for alleged saints and shrines, in the same way as they were consecrated for false deities in olden times.⁴³

Syed Fadhlullah, in his tafsir, also alludes to the social aspect of this verse. He says that during the period of Jahilliyyah, rituals and customs of the ancestors were given the special attribute of sacredness. This attribute stopped people from thinking and thus there was a halt in the process of discernment of errors of the past. Islam came and changed this form of thinking. History was to be taken lessons from and not clothed in sacredness. Islam emphasized that the good and bad that a man would do, should remain with him and should not hinder his offspring from critiquing his actions.⁴⁴

Tafseer Al Qur'an bil Qur'an (Exegesis of the Qur'an by the Qur'an)

It is possible that this belief, discussed in this verse, might be the purport of verse 119 of Sura Nisa (4) which says that Shaytan vowed to mislead people by many things among which was slitting the ears of livestock;

وَلَا ضِلَّيَهُمْ وَلَا مَنِّينَهُمْ وَلَا مَرَنَّهُمْ فَلَيُتَكَنَّ آذَانَ الْأَنْعَامِ وَلَا مَرَنَّهُمْ فَلَيُغَيِّرَنَّ خَلْقَ اللَّهِ ۖ
وَمَنْ يَتَّخِذِ الشَّيْطَانَ وَلِيًّا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ فَقَدْ خَسِرَ خُسْرَانًا مُبِينًا

⁴² Syed Qutb, Fi Zilal al-Qur'an, Volume 3 Page 1219-1221

⁴³ Syed Qutb, Fi Zilal al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 989-991

⁴⁴ Syed Muhammad Hussayn Fadhlullah, Min Wahy al-Qur'an, Volume 8 page 367

and I will lead them astray and give them [false] hopes, and prompt them to slit the ears of cattle, and I will prompt them to alter Allah's creation.' Whoever takes Satan as a guardian instead of Allah has certainly incurred a manifest loss. (4:119)

Similarly, in Sura Al-An'aam verse 138 and 139, a similar belief is criticized;

وَقَالُوا هَذِهِ أَنْعَامٌ وَحَرْتُ حِجْرُهَا لَا يَطْعَمُهَا إِلَّا مَنْ نَشَاءُ بِزَعْمِهِمْ وَأَنْعَامٌ حُرِّمَتْ
ظُهُورُهَا وَأَنْعَامٌ لَا يَذْكُرُونَ اسْمَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْهَا افْتِرَاءً عَلَيْهِ سَيَجْزِيهِمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَفْتَرُونَ
وَقَالُوا مَا فِي بُطُونِ هَذِهِ الْأَنْعَامِ خَالِصَةٌ لِّذُكُورِنَا وَمُحَرَّمٌ عَلَى أَزْوَاجِنَا وَإِنْ يَكُنْ
مَيْتَةً فَهُمْ فِيهِ شُرَكَاءُ سَيَجْزِيهِمْ وَصْفَهُمْ إِنَّهُ حَكِيمٌ عَلِيمٌ

And they say, "These animals and crops are forbidden; no one may eat from them except whom we will," by their claim. And there are those [camels] whose backs are forbidden [by them] and those upon which the name of Allah is not mentioned - [all of this] an invention of untruth about Him. He will punish them for what they were inventing. And they say, "What is in the bellies of these animals is exclusively for our males and forbidden to our females. But if it is [born] dead, then all of them have shares therein." He will punish them for their description. Indeed, He is Wise and Knowing. (6:138-139)

Tafseer Bi-Riwayah (Exegesis by Narrations)

What follows is a number of narrations mentioned by several commentators. The narrations have not been analyzed for authenticity and have been copied verbatim

From as-Sadūq, through his chains, from Muhammad ibn Muslim, from Abū Abdillāh (AS) that he said about the word of Allah (SWT): *Allah has not ordained (the making of) a bahīrah or a sāibah or a wasīlah or a hāmī.* "The people of (the Era of) Ignorance used to say, when a she-camel brought forth two calves in one pregnancy, 'it has joined'; then they did not allow its slaughter or partaking of its meat; and when it bore ten (calves), they declared it to be sāibah; then they did not allow riding it or eating its meat; and hāmī was the male camel, they did not allow it [i.e. riding or eating it]. So, Allah revealed that He had not ordained prohibition of any of these things.⁴⁵

[al-Bahrānī says:] Then Ibn Bābawayh says: "It has been narrated that al-Bahīrah was a she-camel, when it gave birth five times, then if the fifth calf was a male, they slaughtered it (the calf) and men and women partook of it; and if the fifth was a female they tore its ear, and its meat and milk was unlawful to women, but if it died then it became lawful to women. As-Sāibah was a camel, which was freed by nadhr (vow); a man vowed that if Allah gave him recovery from illness or conveyed

⁴⁵ Allama Muhammad Hussain Tabataba'i, Al Mizan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Volume 6 Page 159. [Note all English translations have been taken from www.almizan.org]; Muhammad ibn Mas'ud al-Ayyashi, Tafsir al-Ayyashi, Volume 1 Page 347; Abd al-Ali al-Huwayzi, Tafseer Nur al-Thaqalayn, Volume 1 Page 683

him to his home, he would do so. "And Wasīlah was a goat. If a goat gave birth in seven pregnancies, and the seventh kid was a male, it was slaughtered, and men and women ate from it, but if it was a female, it was joined to the herd; and if there were two kids, a male and a female, they said: 'It has joined its brother;' then it was not slaughtered, and its meat was unlawful for women, except that it died (of itself), the eating of it was lawful for men and women

And Hām was a stallion, when a child of its child was (ready to be) ridden, they said: 'Its back is indeed protected.'" Then he (al-Bahrāni) said: "Also, it is narrated that Hām is a camel which brought forth ten pregnancies; so they said: 'Its back is indeed protected;' so it was not ridden, nor was it prevented from any pasture or water."⁴⁶

Ibn Abbās has narrated from the Prophet (SAW) that he said: "Verily 'Amr ibn Luhī ibn Qam'ah ibn Khandaf became king of Mecca. He was the first who changed the religion of Ismā'īl and obtained idols and put up graven images and invented Bahīrah, Sāibah, Wasīlah and Hām." (The Messenger of Allāh (SAW) said:) "And indeed I saw him in the Fire, the smell of his guts troubles the people of the Fire." Also, it is narrated that [the Holy Prophet said, "I saw him] dragging his guts in the Fire."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Syed Hashim al-Bahrani, *Al Burhan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, Volume 2 Page 372

⁴⁷ *Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir Ibn Abbas*