

ANSWER

وَلَا تَسُبُّوا الَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ فَيَسُبُّوا اللَّهَ عَدْوًا بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ كَذَلِكَ زَيَّنَّا لِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ عَمَلَهُمْ ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ مَرْجِعُهُمْ فَيُنَبِّئُهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ

And do not abuse (insult using foul language) those whom they invoke other than Allah, lest they should abuse (insult using foul language) Allah transgressingly without knowledge. This is how We have made the deeds of every community attractive in their sight. Then, to their Lord is their return whereafter He shall tell them what they have been doing.

[6:108]

COMENTARY

The [verse] has been revealed concerning a particular event and provides guidance in a matter of principle, that is, what you are not permitted to do yourself, for that you cannot become the cause or channel either - both shall remain equally impermissible.

The Background of Revelation

According to the background of revelation as narrated by Ibn Jarīr, when Abū Tālib, the respected uncle of the Holy Prophet ﷺ was on his death bed, the disbelieving chiefs of the tribe of Quraysh who, hostile and torturous to the Holy Prophet ﷺ, always plotting to kill him, became alarmed at the eventuality of the death of Abū Tālib which was likely to become an impediment to their nefarious designs. Because, they thought, if they were to kill Muhammad ﷺ after his protective uncle's death, that would go against the norms of their own self-respect and honour, for people would say that they were unable to do anything like that in the presence of Abū Tālib, but when he died, they killed his helpless nephew. So, they decided to get together and go to Abū Tālib to talk about the matter in a decisive manner.

Every educated Muslim knows that Abū Tālib, though he had not formally embraced Islam, loved the Holy Prophet ﷺ dearly, even respected him as a great bearer of the Divine message right from his heart, and always defended him against his enemies.

So, the Quraysh chiefs formed a deputation who would go to see Abū Tālib. Included as members of the deputation were Abū Sufyān, Abū Jahl, 'Amr ibn al-'Ās and some others. The name of the person chosen to arrange for an appointment to meet with Abū Tālib was Muttalib. He got his permission and escorted the deputation to him.

To Abū Tālib, the deputation said: *You are our elder, and a chief, and you know that your nephew, Muhammad ﷺ has been causing great pain to the idols we worship. We wish that you would talk to him and prevail on him that he should say nothing offensive against our idols, in which case, we shall make peace on the principle that he acts as he wishes on his faith, takes whoever he chooses as the object of his worship, against which, we shall raise no objection/*

Abū Tālib called the Holy Prophet ﷺ to him and said: *Here are the chiefs of your clan.* The Holy Prophet ﷺ turned to the deputation and asked: *What is your wish?* They said: *We wish that you leave us and our idols alone. Do not speak ill of them. We shall leave you and your object of worship alone. This will end our mutual hostility.*

The Holy Prophet ﷺ said: *All right, you tell me, if I were to accept what you were saying, would you be ready to say a Kalimah (statement in words) by saying which you would become masters of the whole Arabia with even people from beyond subscribing to your authority?*

Abū Jahl said: *You are talking about only one Kalimah. We are ready to say ten of them. Tell us what are they?* The Holy Prophet ﷺ said: *Lā ilāha illallāh* [There is no God (worthy of worship) but Allah]. That infuriated all of them. Abū Tālib said to the Holy Prophet ﷺ: *O my nephew, say something other than this Kalimah because it has left your clansmen all confused.*

He said: *As for me, I cannot say a Kalimah other than this. If they were to bring the sun down from the skies and put in my hands, even then I will not say a Kalimah other than this.* His intention was to let them become totally disappointed.

Thereupon, still in anger, they said: *Either you stop speaking ill of our idols, the objects of our worship, or we too are going to start using insulting language against you, and also against that Being of which you claim to be the messenger.* Revealed, thereupon, was the verse: **(And do not abuse those whom they invoke other than Allah, lest they abuse Allah transgressively without knowledge).**

(Lā tasubbū) in this verse is a derivation from the word: **(sabb)** which means to abuse or use insulting language against someone (not in the sense of misuse, maltreatment or corrupt practice as currently used in American English which uses other alternates for hurling invectives - Tr.). The Holy Prophet ﷺ, given his intrinsically high moral disposition, had already been abiding by this rule of conduct. Not even during his childhood, had his blessed speech ever been contaminated with an abusive word for any human being, rather not even for an animal. Perhaps, there may have been some hard word which escaped the lips of some from among the noble Companions which was overestimated as an invective by the disbelievers of Makkah, and which was used as a pretext by the chiefs of the Quraysh when their deputation brought this case up before the Holy Prophet ﷺ and gave the ultimatum that either he stops insulting their deities or they would start insulting theirs.

Thereupon, came the Qur'ānic injunction through which Muslims were prohibited from making any insulting statement against the false objects worshipped by disbelievers. Particularly worth noticing in this verse is that, just a verse earlier (106-107), the address was to the Holy Prophet ﷺ himself.

Examples are: **(Follow what has been revealed to you from your Lord)** and: **(and turn away from those who associate partners with Allah)** and: **(And We have not made you to stand guard over them)** and: **(and you are not entrusted with their affairs).** In all these grammatical forms, the Holy Prophet ﷺ was the addressee who was being asked to do or not to do something. After that, the

form of address was changed in the present verse. It was turned away from the Holy Prophet ﷺ and was turned to Muslims in general.

Said there was: (*Lā tasubbū*). The hint given thereby is that the Holy Prophet ﷺ, who had never used abusive speech against anyone to start with, could not be directly addressed with the words of prohibition for that could make him disheartened. Therefore, the address was made general - and all Sahābah *radī'allāhu 'anhum* too started taking precaution in this matter. (As in Al-Bahr Al-Muhīt)

Related Considerations

That idols have been mentioned in strong words in several verses of the Qur'ān, and that those verses are not abrogated either for they are still recited, is a different matter. The answer is that such words wherever they appear in the verses of the Qur'ān are there as a polemic or debating device to unfold some reality clearly. Intended at such places is no aggression, nor can a sensible person deduce from it such an intention to malign idols or to mock at disbelievers or to irritate them. This is an open difference in approach which is readily understood by those aware of the nuances of diction in any language. They know that the shortcoming or inadequacy of a person is called in question only to elucidate an issue in question. This is common practice in courts where no one challenges the statement being made before the Court as the throwing of invectives against someone. Similarly, narrated before physicians are the kind of defects and drawbacks people could have which, if described elsewhere would be taken as invectives hurled at someone. But, such statement made under medical need is not regarded as abusive talk by anyone.

Thus, when the Qur'ān describes the helplessness of idols in being devoid of sense and consciousness, knowledge and power, it uses a manner of speaking which would help the understanding to understand reality and expose the error or short-sightedness of those who do not. Hence, it was said: **'Weak are the seekers and weak, the sought (idols) - 22:73.'** And as it was said: **(You, and what you worship, other than Allah, are but fuel for Hell - 21:98).** Here too, the purpose is not to speak ill of someone. The purpose is to state the sad end of straying and error. Muslim jurists, may the mercy of Allah be upon them, have made it all clear by explaining: If anyone were to recite this verse too as a tool aimed at causing irritation for disbelievers, then, for him, this recitation, at that time and for that purpose, shall be considered as included under this 'abusing which is prohibited,' and will, therefore, be impermissible - as is the case in the prohibition of the recitation of the Qur'ān at times and places which are *Makrūh* (reprehensible) and known to everyone. (Ruh al-Ma'ānī).

To sum up, it can be said that, no word which could be taken as abusive was ever said by the Holy Prophet Nabi ﷺ, or had appeared in the Holy Qur'ān, nor was there any apprehension that it could happen in the future. Of course, the probability that Muslims at large may fall into such impulsive action did exist, therefore, this verse stopped them from doing so.

End.

