

# SOCIETY IS RESHAPED TO CONFORM TO ALLAH'S WILL

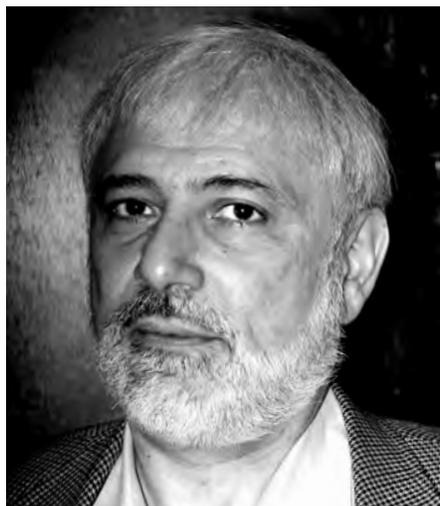
Tafsīr of *Sūrah al-Mā'idah*, the fifth *sūrah* of the Qur'an

By Imam Muḥammad Ḥ. al-'Āṣī

**S***ūrah al-Mā'idah* is the fifth chapter in the Qur'an. As the overwhelming majority of the *āyāt* of this *sūrah* were revealed by Allah (ﷻ) to Muḥammad (ﷺ) in Madinah after the Hijrah, *Sūrah al-Mā'idah* is considered to be a Madinan *sūrah*, even if a small proportion of the revelation occurred in the last year of his life, in which he spent some time in Makkah. In this regard, the Ṣaḥīḥ narratives (collections of prophetic hadiths) suggest that one *āyah* from this *sūrah* was revealed in the last year of the Prophet's (ﷺ)

earthly life, while he was in Makkah. According to 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the *āyah*, "**Today I have brought your *dīn* to perfection...**" (5:3), was revealed on the eve of the Day of 'Arafah, which happened to be on a *jumu'ah* during the Prophet's (ﷺ) Farewell Pilgrimage (Ḥajjah al-Wadā').

The transition from the end of *Sūrah al-Nisā'* to the beginning of this *sūrah* is found in the fiduciary obligation of being fair and just in the distribution of inheritance assets and the exhortation to honor contracts that broadly define the rights and responsibilities of relationships between people. The expression of this common theme of "contracts" in *Sūrah al-Nisā'* relates to men and women honoring their marriage contracts and vows; their accord or mutual agreement contracts; and their security contracts with others. Also included are implicit forms of contractual obligation such as complying with the terms of the inheritance will, discharging any trusts, and carrying out the authorization to



represent and advocate for others (power of attorney), which collectively fall within the purview of the *āyah*, "**Verily, Allah orders you to discharge your trustful relationship to others by allocating it to those who qualify...**" (4:58). The opening *āyāt* of *Sūrah al-Mā'idah* follow with inducements for man to honor the binding agreements that are outlined in both *sūrahs*. Another complementary feature between the two *sūrahs* is that *al-Nisā'* begins with "**Yā ayyuhā al-nās: O people!**" while *al-Mā'idah* begins with "**Yā ayyuhā al-ladhīna**

**āmanū: O you who are securely committed [to Allah]!"** The former behooves the Makkan *sūrah* whereas the latter is befitting of a Madinan one.

The common denominator of *Sūrahs al-Baqarah* and *Āl 'Imrān* is a declaration of Allah's oneness and the historical integrity of prophethood. The shared attributes of *Sūrahs al-Nisā'* and *al-Mā'idah* focus on judicial and legal details.

The general ambiance of *Sūrah al-Mā'idah* situates the reader on a line of reasoning or logical argument against the Yahūd and Naṣarā. Anyone who has read the Qur'an to this point realizes the proxy relationship between political Christians and Jews (imperialists and Zionists) on the one hand and *mushriks* and *munāfiqs* within the Islamic domain on the other. Hence it ought to come as no surprise that any arguments against the former would be punctuated with references to these "allegiance shifters" — *munāfiqs* — and the diehard enemies of Allah (ﷻ) and His Prophet (ﷺ) —

*mushriks*. The extensive treatment of these subjects in *Sūrah al-Nisā'* and *al-Mā'idah* contributes to their correlative and interactional content. Interspersed in their *āyāt* are citations of practical injunctions pertaining to devotional acts as well as delineations of the *ḥalāl* from the *ḥarām*. In one of the two *sūrah*s there is a mention of *tayammum* (the substitute for the ritual washing), whereas in the other, of *wuḍū'* (ritual washing) itself. In *Sūrah al-Nisā'*, divine permission was given to committed Muslim men and women to join each other in marriage. In this *sūrah* morally fortified women from people of scripture are added to the category of legitimate and lawful mates for Muslim men. This commendation in *Sūrah al-Mā'idah* rounds out the subject of *nikāḥ* (marriage), which began in *al-Nisā'*. Another common feature in these two *sūrah*s is an order from on high to be vigilant and vigorous in pursuing justice and fairness, and to bear witness to equity and equality without any prejudice or bigotry. And all of these exhortations and commands are laced with the salient and everpresent feature of *taqwā* (taking into consideration Allah's power presence and corrective justice in social and behavioral matters).

While *Sūrah al-Nisā'* upped the ante in discouraging and deterring people from consuming intoxicants, alcohol, and habit-forming substances, it is the *āyāt* of *Sūrah al-Mā'idah* that finally ban such consumption, ingestion, and injection. The general subject matter of *Sūrah al-Nisā'* concentrates on values and laws that pertain to women, inheritance, and rules of military engagement and warfare. What distinguishes *al-Mā'idah* from *al-Nisā'* are the *āyāt* concerning the legality of certain types of food and animals hunted for food; the *āyāt* referring to *iḥrām* (the inspirational and hallowed status); the *āyāt* on how to deal with aggressors and mobile criminals; and the *āyāt* relevant to the punishment for thieves and the absolution for a false vow.

The *sūrah*'s name, *al-Mā'idah* (the Tablespread), comes from reference to the narration of a tablespread from heaven after the disciples of Jesus (ﷺ) asked for it — yet another miracle among the numerous others performed during the lifetime of Jesus. This story was related to authenticate the genuineness of Jesus' prophethood, and moreover, to be a celebration and festival for his committed followers. It is also known as *Sūrah al-'Uqūd* (the Chapter on Contracts) and *Sūrah al-Munqidhah* (the Rescuer). It is reported that Allah's Prophet (ﷺ) said, "*Sūrah al-Mā'idah* is referred to in the dominion of Allah as *al-Munqidhah* [the Rescuer]," as it will rescue its adherent from the clutches of Hell's angels."

It is related that Allah's Prophet (ﷺ) recited *Sūrah al-Mā'idah* during his Farewell Pilgrimage, thereupon saying, "O People! *Sūrah al-Mā'idah* is the last to have been sent down [to us]. Honor its wholesome values and laws (*ḥalāl*) and interdict what it says are evil and unlawful (*ḥarām*)."<sup>3</sup> He is also reported to have said, "The last *sūrah*s to be imparted [from on

high] are *al-Mā'idah* and *al-Fath*."

*Sūrah al-Mā'idah* includes legislative material and three stories. The legislative material concerns contracts, marriage to women belonging to people of previous scripture, and the "living will." Also registered are divine statutes on slaughtered and hunted animals, as well as on animal hunting during the state of *iḥrām* and its legal repercussions; guidelines touching on issues of ritual cleanliness (*ṭahārah*): *wuḍū'*, *ghusl*, and *tayammum* (ablution, full bath, and surface soil as a substitute for water); laws that prohibit the consumption of liquor (alcohol), intoxicating substances, and habit-forming drugs; punitive measures related to theft and highway banditry; and a penalty for taking a false oath or affidavit (*kaffārah al-yamīn*). Finally, what it means to annul or abandon the scriptural injunctions entrusted to humanity is discussed.

Early scholars who closely analyzed the contents of *al-Mā'idah* commented that in it are 18 obligations found nowhere else:

1. "[Forbidden to you is] ...the animal that has been strangled..." (5:3);
2. "[Forbidden to you is] ...or beaten to death..." (5:3);
3. "[Forbidden to you is] ...or killed by a fall..." (5:3);
4. "[Forbidden to you is] ...or gored to death..." (5:3);
5. "[Forbidden to you is] ...or savaged by a beast of prey..." (5:3);
6. "[Forbidden to you is] ...and all that has been slaughtered on idolatrous altars..." (5:3);
7. "[Forbidden to you is] ...and [you are forbidden] to learn through divination..." (5:3);
8. "And as for the hunting animals that you train by imparting to them some of your knowledge..." (5:4);
9. "...and the food of those who have been vouchsafed revelation aforetime..." (5:5);

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10. "...women from among those who have been vouchsafed revelation before your time..." (5:5) — the first 10 of these, above, pertain to an appetite, a compulsion, or an obsession, such as with food, women, or gambling;
11. The physical/ritual cleanliness that precedes the *ṣalāh*: "O you who are securely committed [to Allah]! When you are about to pray..." (5:6);
12. "Now as for the man who steals and the woman who steals..." (5:38);
13. "O you who are securely committed [to Allah]! Kill no game while you are in the state of pilgrimage..." (5:95);
14. "...and whoever of you kills it intentionally, [shall make] amends in cattle equivalent to what he has killed — with two persons of probity giving their judgement thereon — to be brought as an offering to the Ka'bah..." (5:95);
15. "...or else he may atone for his sin by feeding the needy, or by the equivalent thereof in fasting: [this], in order that he taste the full gravity of his deed, [while] Allah shall have effaced the past..." (5:95);
16. "But whoever does it again, Allah will inflict His retribution on him: for Allah is almighty, an avenger of evil" (5:95);
17. "It is not of Allah's ordaining that certain kinds of cattle [*baḥīrah*, *sā'ibah*, *waṣīlah*, *ḥām*] should be marked out by superstition and set aside from the use of man..." (5:103);
18. "Let there be witnesses to what you do when death approaches you..." (5:106).

Al-Qurṭubī added a 19th obligation, which can be ascertained from the *āyah*, "...for, when you call to *ṣalāh*..." (5:58). There is no mention in the Qur'an of a call to *ṣalāh* (*adhān*) except here; in *Sūrah al-Jumu'ah* there is a reference to a call for *Ṣalāh al-Jumu'ah*, but not to *ṣalāh* in general as is the case here.

In a more comprehensive sense, *Sūrah al-Mā'idah* states the unequivocal fact that Allah's *dīn* — that is, Islam — has been completed and perfected; even though the legal systems of revelation preceding it may have differed with it in some details, there is no conflict in the essence and the gist of it. The Prophet's mission was to communicate and cement this *dīn* by engaging the human will and remaking human society according to the revealed word of Allah (ﷺ).

The outstanding feature of committed Muslims is their determination to fashion their own selves according to Allah's directives; the deviation of others will not hurt them as long as they maintain a working relationship with and for Allah (ﷻ), they honor their word and contracts with others, they shun initiating hostilities against others, and they cooperate for the general good by insisting on virtue and the awareness of Allah's power presence in

human affairs as well as His corrective measures in human societies. Committed Muslims are not permitted to have an alliance with or an allegiance to those who deny Allah. Rather, they are pressed to stand for justice and be its witnesses, and hence when the responsibility to rule is given to them, they are required to discharge it with justice and equality among all people, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

Dietary laws are integral to a healthy soul and a healthy society. In this regard, it should not be surprising that liquor, distilled spirits, and certain fermented, habit-forming substances are declared to be illegal and unlawful. Similarly, entertaining superstitions, gambling, and other addictive behaviors of vice are henceforth proscribed. Committed Muslims should walk through life on a course of truth and truthfulness, even if they encounter difficulties in their determination to maintain their commitment, especially from those quarters whose public proclamations of standing up for what is right are contradicted by their political and military animus toward the Muslims. These two-faced "justice-seekers" are the ones Allah (ﷻ) will ultimately judge in the world to come, revealing who they really were in this world.

The three stories in the *sūrah*, alluded to earlier, are concerned with what can be learned from seminal incidents that occurred in the lives of previous Prophets (ﷺ):

1. the story of Banū Isrā'īl with Moses (ﷺ) when they said to him, "Go you and your Sustainer and fight; we shall remain stationary..." (5:24);
2. the story of Adam's two sons, Qābīl and Hābīl (Cain and Abel), in which the former kills the latter, representing the first crime on earth; and
3. the story of the Repast, which was a miracle performed by Jesus (ﷺ) in the presence of his companions and disciples.

This *sūrah* is the fourth increment in the set of opening *sūrahs* that together elucidate a long, drawn-out struggle — the purposeful lifetime spent toward constituting an *ummah*, organizing a government, and consolidating a society. All this has to be done on the basis of a well-defined conception, a well-understood position, and a well-implemented "religious doctrine." ■



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