

Transforming the Self, Family and Society through a Qur'anic Ethos

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Abstract

This article examines how the Qur'an transforms self, family and society; discusses oppression of oneself and others; and demonstrates how the problems it causes can be prevented by constant self-awareness and self-accountability. In addition, it addresses various issues including the Qur'an's view of oppression's spiritual roots, the origin of human relations, and *taqwā*'s relationship with self-development. In addition, and most importantly, it identifies the oppressor and the oppressed; explains how oppressors can transform themselves; why God holds people accountable; and how to evaluate our strategies' success or failure in dealing with oppression. The methodology used is that of reading the Qur'an intra-textually as one structural unity (*al-waḥda al-binā'iyya li-l-Qur'ān*). This involves cross-examining and integrating the sacred text's linguistic, structural, and conceptual elements. The overarching goal of this approach is to prevent injustice and promote peace through justice, mercy, and mutual accountability.

Keywords: Qur'an, human self-worth, taqwa, oppression (*ẓulm*), accountability, repentance

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Introduction

Islam, God's final message to humanity, came to light in a brutal and cruel environment. Oppression and violence were pervasive practices worldwide at that time. The poor, orphans, widows, and vulnerable were oppressed. Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), following God's revelation, transformed the life of countless oppressed and other individuals and gradually led them to develop the best community in history. Many of the oppressed quickly accepted the message, and within a short time transformed themselves into role models for humanity by embodying a higher standard of morality. This reflects the paradigm shift of understanding the meaning of power from the Qur'anic-prophetic model. Indeed, the model emphasizes that the vulnerable wellbeing is an indicator of the society's strength. Many lessons can be derived from this timeless message, among them how to leverage this model.

By attempting to understand the Qur'an on its own terms, this article applies the methodology of *al-wahḍa al-binā'iyya li-l-Qur'ān* (The Qur'an's Structural Unity).¹ This holistic method reads the Qur'an as a unified text through its linguistic, structural, and conceptual elements because when read in its entirety the divine text represent an integrated whole. In addition, this approach highlights how the meaning of a specific term changes, but never to the extent that its original meaning is violated. Tracing how the relevant terms are derived from their root leads to constructing the Islamic framework for any issue. This preliminary study sheds light on this holistic approach. The Qur'an presents the issue, identifies the problem's root, highlights its negative impact on people and society, and then presents the solution by taking proactive measures to either fix or remove it. Indeed, it presents insights on how to avoid the problem altogether, as with the case of approaching oppression from a spiritual aspect. As the Qur'an refers to itself as *al-Muṣaddiq* (the confirmer or verifier of truth; 5:48) and *Muḥaymin* (overseer, protector, guardian, witness, and determiner of the truth), it holds us accountable to the truth.² Consequently, we should seek its definition when making a decision.³ Therefore, applying a *Muṣaddiq-Muḥaymin* methodology allows us to read and analyze any situation or issue in light of the Qur'an.⁴

Humanity: An Honorable Origin, Identity, and Self Worth

The story of humanity begins in heaven. The first scene began when God announced to the angels and Iblīs (18:50) that human beings will serve as *khalīfa* – His representative on Earth (2:30). “Remember when your *Rabb* said to the

¹ For more details of the classical and contemporary debates concerning this method's genealogy, see Zainab Alwani, “Al-wahḍa al-binā'iyya li-l-Qur'ān: A Methodology for Understanding the Qur'an in the Modern Day,” *Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice*, 1:1 (2018): 7-27. Al-Farahi, Abd al Hamid, *Qur'anic Vocabulary New Looks in the Interpretation of Qur'anic words*, Muhammad Ajmal Ayoub Aslihi Beirut: Dār al-Gārb al-Islāmī, 2002.

² The Qur'an only mentions *Muḥaymin*: God uses it both for Himself (59:23) and the Qur'an (5:48). It is related to Allah's names *al-Raqīb* (The Watcher), *al-Ḥafīz* (The One who protects and guards), and *Al-Shahīd* (The Witness). See (5:48) in: Razi Fakhr al-Din Muhammad ibn. al-Tafsīr al-kabīr. Lebanon: Dar al-Fikr, 2005. Ibn Ashur, Muhammad al-Tahir, al-Tahrir and al-Tanwir, Tunis: al-Dar al-Tunisiyya li'l-Nashr, 1984.

³ See 'A'isha Abd al-Rahman bint al-Shati', *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī li-l-Qur'ān al-karīm* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1971 & 1981) and Issa J. Boullata, “Modern Qur'ān Exegesis: A Study of Bint al-Shati's method,” *The Muslim World* 64 (1974): 103.

⁴ See the application of this methodology on building the meaning of Kafala as a Qur'anic concept: <https://journals.iupui.edu/index.php/JIFP/article/view/24666>

angels, 'I am appointing a representative (*khalīfa*) on Earth.'" The astonished angels, who by nature can think only of absolute goodness and complete peace, responded: "Will You appoint on it someone who would spread corruption and shed blood, whereas we celebrate Your praises and extol Your holiness?" (2:30). God's answer settled the matter: "I surely know that of which you have no knowledge" and "God provided His representative with the knowledge and skills needed to fulfill this role" (2:31-33). While the angels showed no signs of arrogance and prostrated without hesitation, Iblīs refused to comply (15:30-31) on the grounds that: "I am better than him: You created me out of fire, while You created him out of clay" (7: 12). The reply to his arrogance was immediately: "[God] said: Off with you hence! It is not for you to show your arrogance here. Get out, then; you will always be among the humiliated" (7:13 and 15:32-42).

He was expelled from heaven, deprived of God's grace, and subjected to permanent humiliation. Envy eats Iblīs' heart: He states that Adam was created of clay, but ignores the fact that God breathed⁵ into that clay (17:61) and further speaks arrogantly of Adam: "You see this being whom You have exalted above me! You have given this weak creature a position of honor. Yet, if You will give me respite until the Day of Resurrection, I shall bring his descendants, all but a few, under my sway" (17:62). But Iblīs overlooks one fact: Human beings, all of whom have a sense of personal honor, can manage their desires and choose to strike a balance between living the life with which God gifted them and fulfilling their responsibilities to His creations as His representative. Iblīs chooses not to see them when they are elevated by God's guidance, which empowers them to resist temptation and evil. Indeed, people are distinct from all other creations due to their free will and exercise of choice.

The Qur'anic definition for human beings, *insān*, stems from '*uns*, to have affection, be friendly, familiar, intimate, or sociable.⁶ People often develop affection and familiarity for things other than God, like wealth and worldly things (3:14), that make them forget their purpose in life (20:115, 76:1-2, and 59:19). Therefore, the Qur'an constantly reminds humanity of its origin, mission, and

⁵ "When I have shaped him and breathed from My Spirit into him, bow down before him" (38:72). The word *rūḥi* in the Qur'an is usually translated as spirit or soul for lack of an accurate words to explain it. However, the Qur'an explains this: And they ask you about *al-rūḥ*. Say, 'The *rūḥ* is part of my Lord's domain. You have only been given a little knowledge.'(17:85).

⁶ Ibn Fares, *Maqayes Al-Lughah*, vol. 5, p. 421. *Al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī, al-Mufradāt fī gharīb al-Qur'ān*, Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa. p. 491. See: E. Badawi and M.A. Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary for Qur'anic Usage*, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2008. p. 83-84 and see p. 962.

purpose. Indeed, people should reflect deeply upon their creation and the fact that God, who loves them, has blessed them with upright, beautiful, and perfect balance in their physical, mental, and spiritual composition. They were created as the best creation and given cognitive and reflective abilities, as well as intelligence (*'aql*) and heart (*qalb*), to enable them to distinguish between good and evil.

God the Creator, the One Who owns all knowledge and wisdom, explains in detail the exact plan for human beings to fulfill their responsibility and how He will hold them accountable. God wants humanity to know, love, and worship Him out of their own free will and to voluntarily accept the trust (*amānah*) and responsibility (33:72) they have agreed to shoulder. God's infinite justice and mercy do not connect cosmic honor (*karāmah*) and dignity with one's physical or social status, but with one's choices, actions, and deeds (3:195, 4:124, 16:97, and 40:40). However, the Creator established a unique criterion for greatness: attaining *taqwā*. "We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise (each other): God is all knowing, all aware" (49:13). In short, what matters is the person's efforts to improve her/his character and deeds. Therefore, God attributes no virtue to one's physical appearance (95:4 and 82:5-7), but only to one's level of *taqwā* (God-consciousness), which builds one's constant self-awareness.

All human beings' inherent humanity makes them unique and worthy of respect, cosmic honor, and dignity. Dignity is an inherent value: "Indeed, We honored the progeny of Adam, bore them across land and sea, provided them with good things for their sustenance, and favored them far above many of Our creation" (17:70). Human beings are given a degree of choice so they can either follow the revelations conveyed to them by God's messengers, or listen to Satan, who mobilizes all his power to undermine their position. Everyone then returns to its Creator, via death, with their good and evil deeds. The Qur'an assures and emphasizes that on the Day of Judgment, His reckoning will be most fair and accurate. Every action, as little as it may be, shall be taken into account (2:281 and 16:111).

***Taqwā*: Unique Self-Measurement and True Self-Awareness**

The Qur'an is a timeless guidance for human beings in their journey of self-exploration, self-development and beyond: "We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). In God's eyes, the most honored of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware" (49:13).

Taqwā is derived from *waqā*, which literally means to preserve, protect, safeguard, shield from, and keep safe from.⁷ *Taqwā* means “forbearance, fear, abstinence, and piety,⁸ as well as “being careful, knowing your place in the cosmos.” This characteristic is seen when one experiences the awe of God, which “inspires a person to be on guard against wrong feeling and action, and eager to do the things which please God.”⁹ Being devout, pious, and mindful of God is a state of the heart, a state that keeps one always conscious of God's presence.

Taqwā helps one maintain self-evaluation, which is the ability to examine oneself internally as regards his/her intentions, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, behaviors, habits, and relationships. This critical self-evaluation allows people to filter and cleanse their inner self based on their level of *taqwā*. This motivation enables the person who cultivates it to draw closer to God by remaining steadfast on the Straight Path and protects her/him from deviation (8:29, 33:70, and 22:32). As *taqwā* inhabits the heart and only God knows what it conceals, no human being can judge another person's level of *taqwā* (2:204). **Cultivating *taqwā* is a lifelong process that requires constant personal effort.**

Muslim scholars have exerted tremendous effort in analyzing and explaining *taqwā* and how to achieve it.¹⁰ The Qur'an mentions *taqwā* and its derivatives over 250 times, and in every verse it teaches new meanings. Sūra al-Shams (91:8) mentions it in contrast with moral failings (*fujūr*). Tracing these two concepts, namely moral failings (*fujūrahā*) and God-consciousness (*taqwāhā*) (91:8), throughout the Qur'an helps one understand the inner process and how it impacts the person's perception, worldview, actions, and, finally, the end result of her/his actions.

The basis of the Qur'anic concept of human psychology is outlined in these four verses:

وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا ۖ فَأَلْهَمَهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا ۗ قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَن زَكَّاهَا ۖ وَقَدْ خَابَ مَن دَسَّاهَا

⁷ Al-Raqīb, *al-Mufradāt*, p. 530. E. Badawi and M.A. Haleem, p. 1069. <http://www.ahya.org/amm/modules.php?name=Sections&op=viewarticle&artid=154>.

⁸ John L. Esposito, ed. (2003). *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. Oxford University Press. p. 314. Retrieved 2015-07-15.

⁹ Anwer Mahmoud Zanaty. *Glossary Of Islamic Terms*. IslamKotob. p. 221. Retrieved 2015-07-15.

Glossary Of Islamic Terms - Google Books . <https://simplyislam.academy/blog/what-is-taqwā-and-how-to-build-it>.

¹⁰ Al Ghazālī, Abū Hamid. *Ihyā' 'Ul ūm al-Dīn*. Juz' III. Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1982.

By the soul and the One Who fashioned it and inspired it with (moral failings) [in another translation (its own rebellion)] (*fujūrahā*) as well as with consciousness of God (*taqwāhā*). Successful indeed is the one who purifies their soul, and the one who corrupts it fails! (91:7-10).¹¹

The position of every word in the Qur'an has a function and specific purpose, just like each star in the sky (56:75-80). Verse 8 (*fa-alhamahā fujūrahā wataqwāhā*) reveals that the human being (*insān*) is designed with a dual nature, for only such a reality allows one to choose good or evil. Moreover, this allows them to deal with all of the other creations that live on and in the earth. However, this dual nature and ability gives him/her an unlimited scope within him/herself. The verse portrays this unique inner scene with two critical terms: *fujūrahā* and *taqwāhā*. *Fajjar* means to dig up the ground and create an outlet so the water can flow out; to break out of, erupt, or burst; and to cause to explode (explosion), both literally and in the sense of a violent emotion or a situation that arises or develops suddenly.¹² *Fajara* also means to overflow, descend suddenly, break out, rush in, and ignite. The Qur'an uses *fajara* and *taffīr* for creating an outlet so water can flow out (2:60; 17:90-91); to act immorally, lie, sin without caring, increasing one's sins and delaying repentance, deviate from the truth and wrong oneself (38:28, 80:42, 82:14, and 83:7). All of the above encompasses the depth of *fujūrahā*, which describes a human being's inner nature. In this verse, *fujūrahā* is specifically contrasted with (*taqwāhā*), for God wants people to look inward, instead of blaming others, for choosing to act on these desires instead of strengthening their shield of *taqwā*.

Al-Muttaqūn: Truth Seekers

Tracing these two concepts throughout the Qur'an reveals that *fajār* and its derivatives are used in the context of the Day of Judgment. Each sūra guides people to contemplate their future and think of the consequences of their actions.

¹¹ See Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākīr and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākīr (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1961), (91:7-10); al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 2nd ed., ed. Muṣṭafā Ḥusyan Aḥmad (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Istiḳāma, 1952), (91:7-10); Ibn 'Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wal-Tanwīr* (Tunis: al-Dār al-Tūnisiyya lil-Nashr, 1984) (91:7-10).

¹² Muḥammad ibn Mukarram ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut: Dār al-Ṣadr, 1410 AH). Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-'Arūs* (Beirut: Lebanese American University, LAU Stacks Quarto PJ6620 .M852, 1966). Online dictionary: <http://www.baheth.info/index.jsp>. <https://lau.summon.serialssolutions.com/#!/search?ho=t&fvf=ContentType,Book%20%2F%20eBook,f&l=en&q=lisan%20al-arab>. *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, Ed. J M. Cowan. Arabic-English Dictionary.

Sūras 75:5, 82:3, 83:7, and 80:42 contain clear descriptions of the *fujjār*'s characteristics, actions, and end of the consequences in contrast with the *muttaqūn* or *'abrār*. The *'abrār* (the pious, the righteous) means one who practices kindness and charity (19:32). The Qur'an contrasts the *muttaqūn* and *'abrār* with the *fujjār* (38:28 and 83:7 and 18). It clearly defines the *muttaqūn* as "those who bring the truth and accept it – those are the truly pious" (39:33). Verses 2:44 and 3:92 define *birr* as the behavior that reflects one's *taqwā* in all aspects of one's life.¹³ Verse 2:177 which defines *taqwā* holistically, begins with the belief or worldview, moves to the actions and attributes of one's personality, and concludes with "they are people of truth in fulfilling their commitment as representatives of God on earth because they are the *Muttaqūn*." This demonstrates the highest level of perseverance in any circumstances, as well as one's consistent effort to perform at this level of dedication.

Therefore, the person who is constantly mindful of the Creator's presence, practices self-awareness, searches for the truth even if it is against her/his opinion, is among the *'abrār*. This status indicates the high level of someone who has attained *taqwā* and acts according to God's will. As a result, "And they will be told," "All this is surely a reward for you. Your striving has been appreciated" (76:22). Therefore, the Qur'anic concept of *birr* encompasses all the righteous deeds with full understanding of its objectives and impacts (2:177,¹⁴ 2:189, 3:92, 5:2, and 58:9). The *Muttaqūn*, identified as the "patient, true, obedient in worshipping God, spend (in the Way of God), and seek forgiveness in the last hours of the night" (3:17), can control their anger, manage their negative feelings, practice forgiveness, and be grateful. These people, aware of the source of sin (i.e., Satan), remember God, seek refuge in Him, and turn back to Him quickly, after which they remain steadfast and correct their mistakes (7:199-205). This comprehensive description of attributes of the *Muttaqūn* and the *'abrār* clearly

¹³ Abdul Rahman Hallil, (2017), *Maḥmūd al Bir wa al -Mandūmah al 'Akhlaqīyah al Qur'ānīyah: Al bunīyah wa al-siyāq*, Journal of Islamic Ethics, 1(1-2), 122-157. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/24685542-12340006> https://brill.com/view/journals/jie/1/1-2/article-p122_6.xml

¹⁴ "It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards east or west; but it is righteousness to believe in Allah and the Last Day, the Angels, the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your wealth, however much they cherish it to relatives, orphans, the poor, 'needy' travelers, beggars, and for freeing captives; who establish prayer, pay alms-tax, and keep the pledges they make; and who are patient in times of suffering, adversity, and in the struggle between the truth and falsehood. Such are the people of truth, and it is they who are aware of God" (2:177).

reflect the personal transformation of people who cultivate *taqwā* and strive to make the world a better place for everyone.

Sūra Ṣād expounds on this teaching further: “O David, We have made you a vicegerent on Earth: judge, then, between people with truth (and justice), and do not follow vain desire, lest it lead you astray from the path of God. Those who go astray from the path of God will have a severe punishment for having ignored the Day of Reckoning” (38:26). God appoints David as His vicegerent on Earth, which means that he must judge justly and not follow vain desires, for doing so can easily lead people astray. The passage’s concluding sentence gives a general rule that applies to all such people. However, God drew David’s attention to what he might do and put him back on the right track, warning him of the consequence before he even moved toward it. Such an example warns Muslims that, as humans, they may backslide. These verses invite people to reflect on the creation of the heavens and Earth. The story of David is connected with the next verse to illustrate the truth that God wants to establish via His prophets and messengers. The two verses are interrelated: “We have not created heaven and Earth and all that is between them without a purpose” (38:27). This means that deviating from the divine guidance discharges humanity from its responsibility. People who judge based on vain desire deviate from the cosmic law that sustains the universe. Doing so is therefore a very serious matter, one that leads to corruption and disorder. People endowed with insight must always remember and reflect upon these truths.

The next verse clearly explains the meaning of *fujūrahā* and *wa taqwāhā* by comparing them. The Creator asks: “Would We treat those who believe and do good deeds and those who spread corruption in the land as equal? Would We treat those who guard themselves against evil (*al-muttaqīn*) and those who recklessly break all bounds (*al-fujjār*) in the same way?” (38:28). As the latter aspire to lead a life based solely on worldly gains, following their desires, and ignoring the coming of the Day of Judgment, they spread corruption. This verse refers back to 38:27, which states that people can properly establish their lives only if they are in harmony with the rest of the creation. In conclusion, tracing and contemplating *fujūrahā wa taqwāhā* throughout the Qur’an reveals that these two concepts show the reality of one’s inner self.

The usage of these two comprehensive words shows that only the Creator can describe the inner self’s miraculous creation, for they demonstrate the meaning of self-awareness, how it works, and how to develop and enhance it. They teach humanity the significance of self-awareness, being mindful of one’s thoughts, feelings, and subsequent behaviors. Understanding one’s feelings, as well as their causes and how they impact one’s thoughts and actions, is emotional self-awareness. A person with high emotional and spiritual self-awareness understands the internal process associated with emotional experiences and thus

has greater control over them. Having an accurate sense of one's self helps the person decide how to improve his/her strengths and cope with his/her weaknesses and challenges. The person will think deeply before saying or acting upon his/her thoughts or feelings. When the protective shield is weak or its criteria are neither clear nor guided by the Divine, the person will follow his/her desires with no screening. In the case of *fujūr*, namely, when a person sins and feels no regret or need to repent, this only leads to a greater indulgence in sins. Sūra al-Muṭaffifin describes the hearts of the *fujjār*: "But no! In fact, their hearts have been stained by all 'the evil' they used to commit! They arrogantly indulge in disobedience and wrongdoing" (83:14-15).

Arrogant people do not consider God, so they take pride in their evil deeds and continue to hurt others by spreading corruption. "We will set up the scales of justice on the Day of Judgment, so no soul will be wronged in the least. And 'even' if a deed is the weight of a mustard seed, We will bring it forth. And sufficient are We as a 'vigilant' Reckoner" (21:47). This verse provides the criterion for judgment. The broader goal is to remind people of that Day's ultimate goal: to hold them accountable for their deeds. The Judge, the Creator who recorded everything accurately, will judge them justly, for He is the Most Merciful, The Just. Muslims may experience severely testing times and calamities that shake their world's very foundation. Hence, those who remain steadfast, doubt-free, and pursue the right way deserve high rank with God: "Believers, be mindful of God, speak in a direct fashion and to good purpose, and God will put your deeds right for you and forgive you your sins. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger will truly achieve a great triumph" (33:70-71). **A strong sense of *taqwā* alerts the Muslims of any thoughts or feelings that might lead to actions or habits that go against God's guidance; a weak sense of *taqwā* leads to oppression.**

Oppression (*Zulm*)

According to a Qur'anic lexicon, *zulm* (wronging, oppression, injustice, unfairness, and evil) connotes a state of cosmic dysfunction or a seminal darkness upon darkness.¹⁵ On the other hand, God the Creator is the light and source of human guidance (24:35). The original meaning of *zulm* is to put something in the wrong place or attribute wrong to a person (25:4), injustice (20:111), wrongdoing (6:82), and exceeding the limit.¹⁶ The Qur'an mentions it and its derivatives about 289 times in the form of 35 derivatives, especially *zālim*, namely, the oppressor, the self-deceiver who acts unjustly and one who does wrong (7:105). *Mazlūm* is

¹⁵ Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Mufradāt*, p. 315-316.

¹⁶ E. Badawi and M.A. Haleem, p. 612- 613.

defined as one who is treated unjustly (17:33). Other concepts in the Qur'an related to *ẓulm* are *baghy* (outrageous behavior) and *tughyān* (aggression, corruption, tyranny, transgression, and transgression). This reflects the seriousness of this disease.

Oppression, defined as any type of injustice against oneself, another person, or a creation of God, is clearly prohibited in Islam. In this sense, the two original dimensions of *ẓulm* conjoin: *Zulm* as darkness associated with an ignorance of the truth, and *ẓulm* as an injustice/oppression associated with the inversion of an order of right, measure, and proportion, such as is implicit in justice (*‘adl*). Indeed, *ẓulm* violates the person's *fitra*, each person's original state of purity and innocence, and accepting of his/her covenant with God to believe in Him and to accept or reject His guidance. The Qur'an reminds humanity of its *fitra* (original disposition, natural constitution, or innate nature)¹⁷: "And so stand firm and true in your devotion toward the (one ever-true) faith, in accordance with the natural disposition which God instilled in humanity – let there be no change in God's creation – and that is the Straight Way, though most people do not realize it" (30:30). Therefore, oppression corrupts *fitra* and causes the person to ignore mercy, compassion, and justice (22:39).

The Qur'an provides another meaning for oppression as well: transgressing the limits or boundaries set by God, and as something that prohibits oppression at all levels of society (2:114 and 140 and 4:29-31). It prohibits any form of oppression, which could be defined as "an unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power."¹⁸ *Zulm*, derived from the root *z-l-m*, is the opposite of justice (*‘adl*). The unique Qur'anic concept of *ẓulm al-nafs*, which refers to the one wronged, self-deception, self-betrayal, and self-harm, emphasizes one's personal responsibility and accountability (20:111). *Zulm* stems from a lack of self-understanding, which leads one to forget that God created humanity to serve as His trustees and will hold them accountable in the Hereafter. This reflects the facts that they have no fear of accountability (21:47)¹⁹ and control over their *nafs*' impulses. Greed for wealth and power dominate their soul, and restrictions to achieving one's desires are brushed aside.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 743

¹⁸ Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1983.

¹⁹ Yasien Mohamed, "More Than Just Law: The Idea of Justice in the Qur'an," <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/the-idea-of-justice-in-the-Qur'an>. See also Yasien Mohamed, *The Path to Virtue: The Ethical Philosophy of al-Raghib al-Isfahani* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 2006).

The Oppressor: Self-Deception (*Zulm al-Nafs*)

In their own minds, the oppressors exaggerate their worth and minimize that of the oppressed. This arrogant self-deception is based upon such things as lineage, nationality, education, wealth, religion, gender, beauty, age, and physical strength. To protect one's soul against self-deception, one needs to be in a constant state of *taqwā*. Self-deceived people often overestimate their positive attributes (e.g., intelligence, moral character, and competence) and underestimate their negative ones (e.g., mistakes, character flaws, and ignorance). This interesting cycle begins with the person desiring to be right in everything. They then move to gathering data that proves this "fact." Once they obtain that delusional confirmation, they are reaffirmed in their self-bias. Anyone who challenges, disagrees, or poses a different idea instantly insults that person's ego, regardless of the truth.

The Qur'an examines this type of disease of the heart through the example of Pharaoh. This narcissistic, self-centered, and arrogant ruler, who had no regard for the value of human life, proclaimed to his people that "I am your lord, the most high" (79:24). He enslaved, threatened, and tortured people, and thus became a representative of the worst type of *zālim*. Trapping himself in a cycle of extreme self-deception, he felt right all the time and surrounded himself with people who reaffirmed his belief: "Pharaoh ordered, 'O Hāmān! Build me a high tower so I may reach the pathways leading up to the heavens and look for the God of Moses, although I am sure he is a liar.' And so Pharaoh's evil deeds were made so appealing to him that he was hindered from the 'Right' Way. But his plotting was only in vain" (40:36-37). Anyone who challenged his belief became his worst enemy: "Pharaoh threatened, 'How dare you believe in him before I give you permission? This must be a conspiracy you devised in the city to drive out its people, but soon you will see'" (7:123). As a result, he became the worst oppressor: "Indeed, We sent Moses with Our signs and compelling proof to Pharaoh and his supporters, but they followed Pharaoh's orders, and Pharaoh's orders were misguided" (11:96-97). The Qur'an continues to describe the Pharaoh's thinking and behavior:

Pharaoh declared, 'Counselors! I know of no other god for you but myself. So bake bricks out of clay for me, O Hāmān, and build a high tower so I may look at the God of Moses, although I am sure he is a liar.' And so he and his soldiers behaved arrogantly in the land with no right, thinking they would never be returned to Us. So We seized him and his soldiers, casting them into the sea. See then what was the end of the wrongdoers! (28:38-40)

This story, an unparalleled example of arrogance and narcissism that led to the worst *zulm* against people, shows that those who oppress themselves or others will fail. Pharaoh is an extreme case; however, his behavior is the result of continuous neglect of small thoughts and actions that eventually turned him into a

totally unjust, oppressive ruler. Those who succeed are the determined people who remain continuously aware of their thoughts and behavior and thereby negate *zulm*.

The three-step process of breaking this cycle of arrogance begins with acknowledging that one has a problem, humbling oneself by acknowledging one's ignorance (believing that God is the source of knowledge and all blessings makes one humble), and instantly repenting and seeking God's forgiveness and guidance. The Qur'an reminds people: "It is God who brought you out of your mothers' wombs knowing nothing, and gave you hearing and sight and minds, so that you might be thankful" (16:78). The Qur'an affirms: "We raise the rank of whoever We will. Above everyone who has knowledge there is the One who is all knowing" (12:76). In addition, the Qur'an describes three kinds of *zulm*: (1) between human beings and God; anyone who rejects faith in God is an aggressor (*zālim*); (2) among people: "Those who unjustly eat up the property of the orphans eat fire into their own bodies" (4:10 and 2:220); and (3) between the person and self, which the Qur'an calls wronging one's own soul (*zulm al-nafs*) (2:231, 3:117 and 135, 18:35, 35:32, and 37:113). **The Qur'an provides examples of both individual human beings and groups to help people make their own choices. The worst example of an oppressor is Pharaoh.**

The Arrogant Man: The Owner of the Two Gardens

In this story, the Qur'an provides a clear example of *muttaqī* and a *zālim*. "Tell them an example of two men. To one We gave two gardens of grapevines, which We surrounded with palm trees and placed 'various' crops in between" (18:32). What did he do? He went into his garden and wronged himself by saying,

'I do not think this will ever perish, nor do I think the Hour will 'ever' come. Even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, I would certainly find something even better there.' His 'believing' companion replied, while conversing with him, 'Do you disbelieve in the One Who created you from dust, then 'developed you' from a sperm-drop, then formed you into a man? But as for me: He is God, my Lord, and I will never associate anyone with my Lord 'in worship'. If only, when you entered your garden, you had said, "This is God's will. There is no power not [given] by God." Although you see I have less wealth and offspring than you, perhaps my Lord will grant me 'something' better than your garden, and send down upon your garden a thunderbolt from the sky, turning it into a barren waste'. (18:35-39)

The man with the two gardens attributed his success to his own doing and denied the blessings God had bestowed on him; the *muttaqī* tried to enlighten him by holding him accountable and reminding him that God is the one who had blessed him.

‘Ād²⁰ and Thamūd

“Have they never heard the stories about their predecessors, the peoples of Noah, ‘Ād, Thamūd, Abraham, Midian, and the ruined cities? Their messengers came to them with clear evidence of the truth: God would not deceive them; they deceived themselves” (9:70). In other words, God did not wrong them.

“Did you not see how your Lord dealt with people of ‘Ād, of Iram, [the city] of lofty pillars, unmatched in any other land; and Thamūd who carved their homes into the rocks in the ‘Stone’ Valley; and the Pharaoh of mighty structures? They all transgressed throughout the land, spreading much corruption there. So your Lord unleashed on them a scourge of punishment. Your Lord is always watchful” (89:6-14). The people of Thamūd were either *ẓālim* or quiet about the *ẓulm* they witnessed, although the oppressors were a small minority. The majority’s silence created a culture that accepted *ẓulm*, which earned them God’s wrath (27:45-53).

The Prophets as Role Models

Those who repent and who seek closeness to their Creator will be successful (38:24-25). On the other hand, the *fujjār* delay repentance, which hardens their hearts and leads them to indulge in more sins without regret. ‘Abdullāh [bin Mas‘ūd], a Companion of Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), illustrates this feeling: “He said: ‘The believer sees his sins as if he was at the base of a mountain, fearing that it was about to fall upon him. The *fājir* sees his sins as if (they are) flies that stop on his nose.’” He said: ‘Like this’ – motioning with his hand – ‘to get them to fly away.’”²¹ Here are examples of some of the prophets who immediately recognized their mistake against themselves and repented.

Ādam

In the Qur’an, God says:

‘O Ādam, dwell, you and your wife, in Paradise, and eat from wherever you like, but do not go near this tree, otherwise you shall join the transgressors.’ Satan whispered to them so as to expose their nakedness, which had been hidden from them: he said, ‘Your Lord only forbade you this tree to prevent you becoming angels or immortals’... So he brought about their fall through deception. And when they tasted of the tree, their

²⁰ Anwer Mahmoud Zanaty. *Glossary Of Islamic Terms*. IslamKotob.

<https://islamfuture.wordpress.com/2009/08/08/glossary-of-islamic-terms/>

²¹ Al-Harith bin Suwaid said: “ ‘Abdullah [bin Mas‘ud] narrated two aḥādīth to us, one of them from himself and the other from the Prophet (peace be upon him).” *Jāmi‘ at-Tirmidhī* 2497/ Book 37, Hadith 83/ Vol. 4, Book 11, Hadith 2497.

nakedness was exposed to them, prompting them to cover themselves with leaves from Paradise. Then their Lord called out to them, ‘Did I not forbid you from that tree and ‘did I not’ tell you that Satan is your sworn enemy?’ They replied, ‘Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves. If You do not forgive us and have mercy on us, we will certainly be losers (of those who practice self-*zūlm*).’ (7:19-23)

Yūnus

The Qur’an says: “And remember the man with the whale (Yūnus), when he went off angrily, thinking We could not restrict him, but then he cried out in the deep darkness, ‘There is no God but You, glory be to You, I was wrong’” (21:87). Jonah’s people denied the message for many years, and so he gave up, abandoned his city without God’s permission, and eventually ended up in a whale’s belly (37:140-148). From there, he admitted his self-*zūlm* and sought God’s forgiveness.

Mūsā

The Qur’an says:

And when he reached full strength and maturity, We gave him wisdom and knowledge. This is how We reward the good-doers. He entered the city, unnoticed by its people, and found two men fighting: one from his own people, the other an enemy. The one from his own people cried out to him for help against the enemy. Mūsā struck him with his fist and killed him. He said, ‘This must be Satan’s work: clearly he is a misleading enemy.’ He said, ‘O my Lord, I have wronged myself (practiced self-*zūlm*), so forgive me.’ So He forgave him. Indeed, He is the most forgiving, very merciful. Mūsā stated: ‘My Lord, because of the blessings You have bestowed upon me, I shall never support those who do evil. (28:14-17)

The Qur’an Warns

The Qur’an warns of apparently small behaviors that lead to self-deception. All human beings sometimes commit “self-*zūlm*.” But what exactly are these acts, and how do we avoid practicing them? The Qur’an emphasizes that attaining God-consciousness (*taqwā*) helps a person organize his/her thinking and behavior. If we commit such an act, we must immediately recognize it as of self-deception, seek forgiveness, and not repeat it .

Sūra al-Hujurāt

According to most scholars, Sūra al-Hujurāt was revealed during the late Medinan period, most likely in 630 CE/9 AH.²² The sura establishes the rules for refined manners in a noble community by enforcing a system of accountability. As the whole community is a single entity, its integrity is one. Those who are strong and enjoy good health, intelligence, children, and support sometimes think that such blessings give them the right to ridicule the less fortunate (e.g., the vulnerable, differently abled, childless or orphans without support). But none of these earthly values is of any importance as a criterion of high status. The Qur'an keeps reminding humanity that all people descend from a single soul: "Whoever defames anyone actually defames all (Neither shall you defame yourselves.)" (49:11).

The Qur'an and the Prophet's teachings enjoin Muslims to be very careful about offending or insulting others. Believers are prohibited from name calling, mockery, and disrespecting people in any way:

O you who believe! Let not some people among you laugh at others. It may be that the (latter) are better than the former: nor defame nor be sarcastic to each other, nor call each other by offensive nicknames: ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness, (to be used by one) after he has believed: and those who do not desist are (indeed) doing wrong. (49:11)

The Qur'an also warns that suspicion, which leads to spying and backbiting, should be avoided. "O you who believe! Avoid suspicion as much as possible. For suspicion in some cases is a sin. And spy not on each other, nor speak ill of each other behind their backs..." (49:12). The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, "Muslims are brothers (and sisters). They should not betray or humiliate each other."²³

Qur'an 49:12 establishes an important mechanism to protect an individual's integrity and freedom while teaching people how to cleanse their thoughts, feelings and consciences. Following the sūra's pattern, it begins with the endearing address, "Believers," and then orders them to avoid most suspicion so they do not begin to doubt others. It justifies this order by saying that some suspicion is sinful. Given that this prohibition applies to most suspicions and that the rule is that some suspicion is sinful, the verse implies that all negative suspicion should be avoided on the grounds that no one knows which part of

²² Qutb, Sayyid, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān*, 23rd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1994), (49: 6,11, 12,13). Qutb, Sayyid, *In the Shade of the Qur'ān (Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān)*. Translated and edited by Adil Salahi and Ashur Shamis. (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 2001), (49: 6,11, 12, 13).

²³ Al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīya, 1990), *Sūrah al-Hujurāt*.

his/her doubts are sinful. This way, we cleanse our heart and mind by entertaining only friendly and affectionate thoughts toward others. Each person in the community or family thus feels safe, and that feeling builds trust and further compassion among people.

Life in a community free of ill thoughts and actions is both peaceful and just. The verse does not just educate people's hearts and souls, but also establishes a principle that applies to their interactions. The verse moves on to lay down another principle that provides social guarantees: Do not spy on others or seek to look at other people's faults and errors, because doing so can result in suspicion-based actions. The Qur'an opposes spying because it seeks to prevent people's hearts from sinking into this shameful action and losing their high moral standards. Qur'an 49:12 compares backbiting to a rather disgusting action, that of "eating the flesh of your dead brother [or sister]," and thus opens the door of repentance. As such, this text is clearly meant to be practiced so that people can transform their actions, behaviors, and habits in order to protect everyone's sanctity and integrity: "When they hear slanderous talk, they turn away from it, saying, 'We are accountable for our deeds and you for yours. Peace is our only response' to you! We want nothing to do with those who act ignorantly" (28:55). Abū Hurayrah reports that when the Prophet (peace be upon him) was asked to define backbiting, he replied: "To say something about your brother, something he dislikes." Someone then asked: "Suppose that what I say is true of my brother?" The Prophet answered: "If you say what is true, you are guilty of backbiting; but if it is untrue, you are guilty of willful defamation" (Related by al-Tirmidhī who states that it is authentic).

The Qur'an provides a comprehensive model of the oppressor–oppressed relationship. There is an individual and communal responsibility toward both. Helping oppressors continue to do wrong or indulge in wrongdoing is among the gravest of mistakes. People should not imitate them; instead, they must do what they can to stop them and make them realize their error so that the existing level of oppression will not increase and spread. Some people support oppressors because they are a relative or a friend. However, the Prophet warned against this. Narrated from Anas: "The Messenger of God said, 'Help your brother, whether he is an oppressor or he is an oppressed one.' People asked, 'O Prophet. It is all right to help him if he is oppressed, but how should we help him if he is an oppressor?' The Prophet replied, 'By preventing him from oppressing others.'"²⁴ The Qur'an also proclaims:

Those who, when tyranny strikes them, defend themselves. The retribution for an evil act is an evil one like it, but whoever pardons and makes

²⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Volume 3, Book 43, Number 624.

reconciliation – his reward is [due] from God. Indeed, He does not like wrongdoers. Whoever avenges himself after having been wronged – those have not upon them any cause [for blame]. The cause is only against the ones who wrong the people and tyrannize upon the earth without right. Those will have a painful punishment. Whoever is patient and forgives – indeed, that is of the matters [requiring] determination [i.e., on the part of those seeking the reward of God]. (42: 39-43)

These verses include two matters: (1) taking revenge on an oppressor and (2) forgiveness on the part of the oppressed. Here, God praises the Muslims for having the strength and will to avenge themselves in a just manner, for restoring their rights, and for not allowing aggressors to take advantage of themselves and others. They are by no means incapable, weak, or humiliated, and are quite capable of exacting revenge, and yet they forgive. Many verses and prophetic narrations address this issue and encourage the oppressed to forgive the oppressor when the former is in a position to exact revenge. The oppressed's desire to take revenge is a strong feeling, one that is very difficult to deal with immediately. However, the Qur'an encourages the oppressed to think of forgiveness because it helps him/her start the process of self-healing and move forward. This is not to be confused with allowing the oppressors to continue their behavior, but a recognition of the fact that they must be held accountable for their actions toward themselves and others. As this approach is the only true help that such people need, it is an act of mercy and compassion, as well as an obligation.

Tawba (Repentance)

Tawba means to return to goodness and amend one's thoughts, feelings, and actions so that he/she can create a new lifestyle (2:37, 2:160, 4:64 and 5:39). *At-Tawwāb*, one of God's attributes, means that God constantly turns a person's heart toward repentance and accepts it (4:26-27). The first step is intrapersonal: The wrongdoer must face him/herself and admit there is a problem: *And those who, having done something to be ashamed of or wronged their own souls, earnestly bring God to mind, and ask for forgiveness for their sins—and who can forgive sins except God?—and are never obstinate in persisting knowingly in (the wrong) they have done* (3:135).

The second step is to show regret and repent immediately: *“God accepts the repentance of those who do evil in ignorance and repent soon afterwards. To them will God turn in mercy, for God is full of knowledge and wisdom”* (3:17). This is exemplified by the account of how Ādam and Iblīs wronged themselves. When God created Ādam and commanded the angels and Iblīs to bow to him, Iblīs refused to do so. “God said, ‘What prevented you from bowing down as I commanded you?’ He replied, ‘I am better than him: You created me from fire and him from clay’” (7:12). Iblīs was envious and arrogant and thought only of

revenge. He promised God that he would lure Ādam, his children, and all of their offspring to hellfire with him. But when Ādam and Ḥawwā' were tempted by Iblīs and ate from the forbidden tree, "Their Lord called to them, 'Did I not forbid you to approach that tree? Did I not warn you that Iblīs was your sworn enemy?' They replied, 'Our Lord. We have wronged ourselves. If You do not forgive us and have mercy on us, we will certainly be losers'" (7:22-23). They instantly felt shame and regret and sought forgiveness.

The third level of repentance involves two steps: (1) ending the wrongdoing or self-deception immediately and (2) establishing a new lifestyle in which it has no place: "*Those who repent and make amends and openly declare (the truth); to them I turn, for I am Often Returning, Most Merciful*" (2:160). The Qur'an encourages people to "Establish regular prayers at the end of the day and at the approaches of the night. For those things that are good remove those that are evil" (11:114). We have to remember that God – limitless is He in His glory – has no need for His servants or their repentance. When they repent, they benefit only themselves because their lives and that of their community improve and become happy, as explained in Sūra Hūd (11: 3,52,61). Everyone makes mistakes; owning up to them and expressing remorse are the only ways to move forward and keep relationships strong. Anas ibn Mālik reported: The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "All of the children of Ādam are sinners, and the best sinners are those who repent."²⁵ Delivering an effective apology is not always easy, but doing so is essential to maintaining healthy personal and familial connections. A sincere apology shows that one cares about the other person, which helps rebuild trust and opens communication with the wronged person. Furthermore, all wrongdoers must often engage in *kaffāra*, an act of repentance that relieves one from sins or wrong deeds: "If you remain mindful of God, He will give you a criterion of discerning between right and wrong, acquit you from wrong deeds and forgive you" (8:29). 'Uthmān bin 'Affān reported that Prophet Muḥammad said: "When the time for a prescribed prayer is due and a Muslim performs its ablution and its acts of bowing and prostration properly, this prayer will be an expiation for his past sins, so long as he does not commit major sins, and this applies forever."²⁶

²⁵ *Sunan al-Tirmidhī* 2499, *Mishkat al-Masābīḥ* 2341, Book 9, Hadith 114.

²⁶ Narrated by Muslim, Book 8, 56. *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn* 1046.

***Kaffāra* (Expiation of Wrong and Reviving the Soul)²⁷**

Kaffāra is an important Qur'anic strategy. Defined as an expiation of sin or compensation for an offense, it serves both as an effective system for change and transformation in terms of one's thoughts, behaviors, and actions, as well as an effective mechanism for allowing wrongdoers to develop a moral and spiritual lifestyle. This teaching's significance lies in transforming the soul through good acts that guide Muslims toward moral, spiritual, and social betterment. *Kaffāra* is significant in the healing process for many reasons: It helps the person learn and practice mindfulness and self-awareness in order to purify the soul and mind, stop the toxic self-shame and foster self-compassion. This highlights the Sharia's purpose as being that of guidance, rather than of retribution, and sheds light on the mercy that God fosters for everyone by treating their shortcomings as an opportunity for moral growth and refuge. During the Prophet's time, the first predominant form of *kaffāra* was freeing a slave. *Kaffāra* is required for an accidental homicide, as is *dīyah* (blood-money), which must be paid to the victim's family (4:92-93). While *dīyah* may be forgiven by the victim's family, the *kaffāra* of freeing a slave is required. If this is not possible, the perpetrator must fast for two consecutive months. The consequences of an accidental murder extend beyond violating the family's right; indeed, killing a human being that God created is a serious matter and requires a holistic reformation and purification. The second one is charity, which highlights how violating the Sharia's rules is atoned for by protecting and providing for the needy. The third one is fasting, which purifies the perpetrator's soul so he/she can foster the self-discipline and piety needed to refrain from wrongful actions.

These rulings emphasize God's Compassionate, Just and Merciful Nature—qualities He encourages Muslims to foster among themselves and others by not committing sins that ruin the soul, harm the individual's character, and destroy personal relations. This is where *kaffāra* comes in, for it prevents wrongdoers from permanently hurting their soul and allows Muslims to make amends. The prophetic teaching emphasizes that “when you do a wrong deed, follow it with a good deed and it will wipe it away.” The Qur'an emphasizes feeding in general and in the context of *kaffāra*. the Qur'an describes the *abrār* (the pious) as: "And they feed, for the love of God, the poor, the orphan, and the captive; saying to themselves, “We feed you only for the sake of Allah, seeking neither reward nor thanks from you” (76:8-9). This is an important way to heal the soul and replace any negative feelings it has with generosity despite loving wealth.

²⁷ This important chapter in *fiqh* provides a comprehensive legal explanation of *kaffāra*. However, this article addresses this issue from the spiritual perspective. One can review the detailed legal/*fiqhī* explanations in the great collections of *fiqhī* books.

Fasting is prescribed for self-discipline and to learn patience, forbearance, perseverance, and steadfastness. Its second goal is to foster empathy for the poor and needy. Self-control is important for wrongdoers because it is an active form of patience and refraining from physical desires that helps foster moral and spiritual resilience. Moreover, it instills a sense of humility in the perpetrator, through which he/she can avoid future sins and acquire hope: “These believers will be given their rewards twice over because they are steadfast, repel evil with good, give to others out of what We have provided for them” (28:54).

The Role of the Family in Preventing *Zulm*:

The divine goal of human relations is to promote mutual cooperation, counseling, forbearance, compassion, forgiveness, help, and accountability. This requires people to acquire the moral standards that are acceptable to the Creator so that they can live together in peace. Achieving this goal, therefore, is the family structure’s overriding *raison d’être*. Peace needs to pervade the home, for the family is the society’s cornerstone and the starting point for community life. A marriage focused on God is the foundation of a healthy family. While individual people work on developing self-perception and self-understanding, building characters and habits, gaining knowledge of life and increasing in *taqwā* (self-awareness), getting married means putting one’s knowledge into practice. *Sūra al-Nisā’* introduces a comprehensive framework on how to establish a moral, compassionate, and peaceful relationship between the couples and then the community so they can accomplish their mission as God’s representatives (*khalīfa*).

The first unit in human existence was the family produced by *Ādam* and *Ḥawwā’*. All of humanity is their progeny. The Qur’an uses *nafs* (self) in both the individualistic (2:48) and collective (4:1) sense. The opening verse 4:1 emphasizes that the relationship between “self” and “other,” where “other” is seen as an extension of the “self,” and not a severed separate entity. The Qur’anic concept of “self” is closely linked to “pair” (*zawj*), as can be seen in many verses, among them: “And God has given you mates of your own kind and has given you, through your mates, children and grandchildren, and has provided for you sustenance out of the good things of life. Will they then believe in falsehood and deny God’s favors?” (16:72). The Creator divided humanity into males and females, established mutual affection between them, and prepared them to find tranquility and love in each other. In fact, the Qur’an even defines an Islamic marriage: “And among His signs is this: that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts). Verily in that are signs for those who reflect” (30:21). In view of this, the Qur’an makes mutual care and mutual

accountability within the family the cornerstone of its system of social care and security.

It is a great responsibility to raise dignified and healthy (physically, mentally, and emotionally) children who, as they grow up, will submit to the Creator and strive to fulfill their purpose: being God's *khalīfa*. Each child, therefore, has the right to grow up in a peaceful home that will help him/her achieve this goal. The family nurtures the children's talents and strengthens their potential. The most profound influences on a person are seen within the home, for it serves as a shelter that gives comfort as well as provides nurturing ties of love, affection, mutual sympathy, and care while observing values that maintain purity and prevent lewdness. Children are to be reared, trained, looked after, and taught within this unit. Relations within the family are to be shown in an atmosphere of love and respect that radiates mutual sympathy and genuine care. Although parents are responsible for raising their children, the extended family's support is crucial in terms of providing psychological and social diversity, as well as companionship, both for them and the parents. This support offers beneficial learning and socialization experiences for the former and the necessary sense of security and usefulness for the latter.²⁸ As there is less dependence upon one-to-one relationships in such a framework, fewer emotional demands are made upon each member. Even though God gives humanity this ideal framework to uphold in the family, He also guides people through situations of *ẓulm* by identifying the oppressive practices that families and societies have fallen into.

Sūra al-Nisā' begins by emphasizing the rights of orphans, particularly girls, hurt by the very relatives and guardians who were supposed to look after them. Their male guardians, who sought only to quickly consume the orphan's inheritance, often detained young and rich orphaned girls at home until they or one of their sons could marry them. Love was not involved. In such a society the young and vulnerable, as well as widowed women, were wronged and deprived of their rightful share of any inheritance. Strong-bodied male warriors got the largest share, while the weak and vulnerable received insufficient portions.²⁹ And it was for such miserly shares that these women were detained, for their guardians wanted to make sure that none of their property would fall into the hands of

²⁸ Lamya al-Faruqi, "Women, Muslim Society and Islam" (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1994), 40-43. Also see Zainab Alwani, "Muslim Women and Global Challenges: Seeking Change through a Qur'ānic Textual Approach and the Prophetic Model," *Institute of Objective Studies* (New Delhi: Genuine Publications and Media Pvt, 2012).

²⁹ Sayyid Qutb, *Sūrah al'-Nisā'*.

strangers. As a result, their male-dominated society devalued and mistreated all women throughout their lives.

Women were treated as part of the estate. When a man died, his nearest male kin would throw his robe over the widow to show that he retained her for himself. Furthermore, he could marry her without paying any dowry or marry her off to someone else, in which case he would receive her dowry. In other instances, if a husband no longer wanted his wife, he seemed to be at liberty to mistreat her without any consequences. He could leave her in suspense (i.e., neither married nor divorced) until she bought her freedom with her own money.³⁰ The Qur'an prohibits taking advantage of the spouse in any way, especially when a relationship has deteriorated to the point of divorce:

When you divorce women and they are about to fulfill the term of their 'iddah, either retain them back or let them go, but do not retain them to injure them (or) take undue advantage; if anyone does that, he wrongs his own soul. (2:231)

Instead, the Qur'an instructs both spouses to remember any positive aspects or experiences they shared and to honor their shared relationship by respecting and being just to each other: "...the husbands should either retain their wives together on equitable terms or let them go with kindness"(2:229).

The story of Khawla teaches many valuable lessons in this regard by emphasizing *kaffāra* in action. 'Ā'isha recounts the story in the following *ḥadīth saḥīḥ*:

Blessed is the One Whose hearing encompasses all things. I heard some of the words of Khawla bint Tha'laba, but some of her words were not clear to me, when she complained to the Messenger of God (ﷺ) about her husband: 'O Messenger of God, (ﷺ) he has consumed my youth and I split my belly for him (i.e., bore him many children). But when I grew old and could no longer bear children, he declared *zihār* upon me (declared me as unlawful to him as his mother). O God, I complain to You.' She continued to complain until these verses were revealed: 'Indeed God has heard the statement of she who pleads with you (O Muḥammad) concerning her husband, and complains to God.'³¹

God supported Khawla's complaint and banned this unjust custom. After the four verses' revelation, the Prophet said to Khawla, "Command him to free a slave." Khawla replied, "O God's Messenger, he does not have any to free." Then the Prophet said, "Let him fast for two consecutive months." Khawla replied, "By God, he is an old man and cannot fast. Then he said, "Let him feed sixty poor

³⁰ Sayyid Qutb, *Sūrah al'-Nisā'*.

³¹ *Ṣaḥīḥ ibn Mājah*, Book 10, Hadith 48: Vol. 3, Book 10, Hadith 2063.

people with a *wasq* of dates.” Khawla said, “O God’s Messenger, by God, he does not have any of that.” The Prophet said, “We will help him with a basket of dates.” Khawla replied, “And I, O God’s Messenger, will help him with another.” The Prophet said, “You have done a righteously good thing. So go and give away the dates on his behalf.”³² And she did just that.

Identifying those words and actions that are hurtful are essential to helping people improve themselves. This process requires patience, sacrifice, and compromise, for only such practices can save a damaged relationship. If necessary, a third party should be engaged (4:35). Following the divine guidance laid out in this process will prevent oppression.

Even though many such wrong pre-Islamic practices have died out, the Qur’an’s methodology of identifying a problem and presenting a practical solution can be applied to the many abuse-related practices (i.e., emotional, physical, financial, and spiritual) within families today. Women, children, orphans, widows, those facing financial struggles, the differently abled, and those who are vulnerable are still being bullied by people who think they are better. The diseases of arrogance and narcissism remain widespread in homes, schools, places of work, and so on. Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) came as a mercy to the world and to live the Qur’an’s teachings so people could identify and abandon their wrongdoing and self-deception.

Muslims are taught that each of them is obliged to stop such people and actions. The family is the first place in which this dangerous disease can be caught and dealt with. Parents who see their sons or daughters practicing self-deception by calling their siblings, friends, or animals (any of God’s creations) derogatory names or engaging in backbiting, ridiculing, humiliating, belittling, physical violence against someone are responsible and accountable in front of God to end such transgressions. If every adult in the extended family structure were to help children work through their negative emotions/feelings at a young age and taught them to turn to God when they are hurting, many of the major social injustices would disappear. All family members are responsible for identifying and then stopping any diseases of the heart (e.g., arrogance, greed, stinginess, misery, envy, and jealousy) before they become difficult to control. The family should practice mutual teaching of the truth and counseling: “By the time, surely humanity is in ‘grave’ loss, except or those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and counsel each other to hold on to truth and counsel each other to be steadfast” (103:1-3).

³² Ibn Kathīr Ḥafīz, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, translated by a group of scholars under the supervision of Sheikh Safiur-Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri Dar-us-Salam, Riyadh 2000, Sūrah al-Mujādilah.

Conclusion: Toward Establishing Communal Accountability

The first verse of Sūra al-Nisā' concludes with the important concept of al-Raqīb (The Watchful, The All-Observing), one of God's Beautiful Names. Al-Raqīb is the observer who keeps watching over something so that nothing will harm it. "*Raqab*," *raqīb*'s verbal form, means "to keep a close eye on it" so that it will be protected."³³ The concept of al-Raqīb watching over everyone and everything is called *murāqaba*. Muslims must remember 4:1 in terms of connecting accountability and observing: "O humanity, be conscious of your Rabb (Nurturer), who created you from a single soul (*nafs wāḥida*), and from it [of like nature] created its mate, and from the two has spread a multitude of men and women. And remain conscious of God, through Whom you demand your mutual [rights] from one another, and (reverence) the wombs (that bore you). Verily, God is ever watchful over you" (4:1). Practicing *murāqaba* helps one resist oppression, for "not a word does a person utter without having a 'vigilant' observer ready 'to write it down" (50:18), and develop self-awareness and self-accountability.

Accountability is a foundational principle of a healthy relationship for three reasons: (1) it builds self-awareness and increases the level of *taqwā*. Being accountable for one's actions helps people think of every step they take and why; (2) practicing accountability encourages empathy and compassion by making people think of how their words and actions affect the people around them (49:6, 11, and 12); and (3) it fosters a culture of collaboration when everyone in a relationship agrees to be held accountable. The Qur'an defines this as *awlīyā'*: "The believers, both men and women, support each other; they encourage what is right and forbid what is wrong; they keep up the prayer and pay the prescribed alms; they obey God and His Messenger. God will give His mercy to such people. God is Almighty and Wise" (9:71).

³³ Ibn 'Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wal-Tanwīr*, (Q. 13:33).