

The Quran and its Message

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سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

DOES THE QURAN REALLY SANCTION BEATING OF WIVES?

Joseph A Islam

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It is a commonly accepted position amongst Islamic orthodoxy that the 'beating' of women is sanctioned by the Quran. The verse taken to support this position is 4:34. The extent of the 'beating' is only 'lightened' by making use of [Prophetic traditions](#) as support and other interpretations sourced from [Islamic secondary sources](#).

Please note in the video shared below the approach usually adopted by orthodox thinkers who heavily rely on interpretations derived from [Islamic secondary sources](#) almost shackling independent thought outside the remit of what is deemed '**permissible**' by the clergy.

Please note in particular the comment by Hamza Yusuf "**Because it is the Fuqaha that interpret the Quran, not the common people**" [time=3m27s] which arguably limits interpretive scope. Such an assertion arguably stands in stark contrast to many verses of the Quran which encourage all humanity, including the **disbelievers** to deeply research, evaluate, ponder and to intrinsically scrutinise the Quran as part of one's intellectual endeavours whilst seeking the truth and guidance. ('Tadabbur' 4:82, 23:68, 38:29, 47:24).

http://www.youtube.com/embed/5Fj39A5_7RI

Before we deal with the particular verse at the helm of the article, we will attempt to seek input from other verses which part with guidance on matters of spousal relationships in a general capacity.

GUIDANCE OF THE QURAN IN DEALING WITH SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIPS

030.021

"And among His Signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may find tranquility in them (Arabic: litaskunu), and He has placed between you love (Arabic: muwaddatan) and mercy (Arabic: wa-rahmatan). Indeed, in that are Signs for those who reflect"

From the above verse it is clear that the institution of marriage is one of **tranquility, love and mercy**. Even in the complex matter of divorce, we find clear instructions of arbitration, mutual consultation and kindness with no recourse to harm or injury of any kind. Please note the Arabic word 'Diraran' in the following verse and its prohibition. This arguably remains very pertinent to the general theme of this article which seeks to consider a best possible interpretation.

002:231 (Part)

"And when you divorce women and they reach their prescribed time, then either retain them in good fellowship or set them free with liberality, and do not retain them for injury / hurt (Arabic: Diraran), so that you exceed the limits..."

وَلَا تُمْسِكُوهُنَّ ضِرَارًا لِّتَعْتَدُوا

Diraran

Illustration - Joseph Islam

3. ضَارَهُ, inf. n. مُضَارَةٌ and ضَرَّارٌ, He harmed him, injured him, or hurt him, in return, or in requital: whence the saying in a trad., لَا ضَرَرَ وَلَا ضِرَارَ فِي الْإِسْلَامِ There shall be no harming, injuring, or hurting, of one man by another, in the first instance, nor in return, or requital, in *El-Islâm*: (Mgh, TA:*) ضَرَّارٌ is syn. with مُضَارَةٌ:

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [1]

004.019

"O you who believe! it is not lawful for you that you inherit women (by) force (against their will), and do not put constraint upon them in order that you may take part of what you have given them, unless they are guilty of manifest indecency. And consort / live with them in kindness (Arabic: bil-

mar'rufi). But if you dislike them, it may be that you dislike a thing in which God has placed much good"

BEATING THE WIFE?

The verse which contains the alleged instruction to **'beat'** is 4:34.

Let us note a popular translation of this verse.

004.034

"Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because God has given the one more (strength) than the other and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient and guard in (the husband's) absence what God would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct admonish them **(first) (next)** refuse to share their beds **(and last) beat them (lightly)** ; but if they return to obedience seem not against them means (of annoyance): for Allah is Most High Great (above you all)"

The reader will have noted the many brackets in the above translation. The bracketed word 'lightly' is arguably influenced by [Prophetic traditions](#) which serve to lighten the intensity of the beating.

The Arabic which is translated as 'beat' in this context is **'idribohunna'**

(1) SO WHAT DOES 'IDRIBOHUNNA' MEAN?

In **general Arabic parlance** without appreciation of **any wider Quranic context** or possible **alternative classical usage**, the phrase **'idribohunna'** would be read as **'beat them'**. To deny this usage in general parlance and Arabic literature would not only be incorrect, but intellectually dishonest.

However, the purpose of the article is to understand the phrase in light of its **best possible** classical Quranic usage and in light of its wider Quranic themes, especially those that deal with spousal relationships. Some of the guiding verses have already been cited above (30:21, 2:231 and 4:19).

In the end it is for the reader to decide what they feel is the most cogent or likely interpretation. One's endeavour in interpreting the Quranic verses must always be to attain the **'best meaning'** whilst reconciling all the Quranic verses, context and themes.

039:018

"Those who listen to the Word (the Quran) and follow the **best meaning in it / best of it (Arabic: fayattabi'una ahsanahu)** those are the ones whom God has guided and those are the one's endowed with understanding **(Arabic: Albabi)**"

039.055

"And follow the best of what is revealed to you from your Lord, before the penalty comes to you suddenly while you do not perceive!"

THE MANY MEANINGS OF THE ROOT WORD DAD-RA-BA FROM WHICH DARABA IS FORMED

أَضْرِبُوهُنَّ

With all my work with Arabic lexicons, nothing has intrigued me more than the multifaceted meanings of the root word for 'darab' (DAD-RA-BA), not only in general Arabic parlance, but even in the Quran itself. For example, one English commentator of the Quran, despite rendering 'darab' in 4:34 as 'beat', elsewhere appreciates the figurative or metonymic sense of the verb 'daraba'. The examples he quite correctly quotes are:

"...daraba fi'l-ard ("he journeyed on earth"), or daraba 'sh -shay' bi'sh -shay' ("he mixed one thing with another thing"), or daraba mathal ("he coined a similitude" or "propounded a parable" or "gave an illustration"), or 'ala darb wahid ("similarly applied" or "in the same manner"), or duribat 'alayhim adh -dhillah ("humiliation was imposed on them" or "applied to them")..." [2]

These are all multifaceted meanings springing from the same root word, DAD-RA-BA.

ضَرَبَ aor. i. To beat, strike (with acc. and ب);
This is the primary meaning, but the verb admits of a great variety of interpretations,
thus ضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا 14 v. 29, "God propounds as an example," or "puts forth a parable" (with ل); thus also at 43 v. 16 مَا ضَرَبَ لِلرَّحْمَنِ مَثَلًا,

Source: A Dictionary and Glossary of the Koran - John Penrice 1873 [3]

The multifaceted nature of the root word 'DAD-RA-BA' can also be seen in so many examples in the Quran.

One of the meanings of 'darab' is to give examples; to propound a similitude or to coin parables

(2:26 - example given of a gnat, 14:24-5 - an example given of a goodly word; 14:45 - the dwellings of old; 16:75 - an example of a slave, 16:76 - an example of the dumb, 16:112 - a secure town, 22:73 - example of a fly, 18:32 - example given of two men with two gardens etc)

There are also many other examples such as to **set out on a journey or to travel** (3:156; 4:94; 4:101; 5:106 (witnesses and travel) 73:20; 2:273); **or to condemn** (2:61 - The Children of Israel's complaint with regards food); **to seal** (18:11 - companions of the cave), **to take away** (as in the reminder 43:5) **and of course, to strike or beat** (2:60, 2:73; 7:160 (Moses^(pbuh) and the rock); 8:12 (instruction to the angels); 20:77 (Moses^(pbuh)); 24:31 (women and feet); 26:63; 37:93; 47:4 (battlefield); 8:50; 47:27 (angels and death))

(2) 'IDRIBOHUNNA' TO MEAN SHUN OR SEPARATE

'Daraba' can also mean to turn away or shun if it appears with a preposition '*an*'. As there is no preposition '*an*' in the Quranic word '*idribohunna*', it is usually argued that the Arabic word cannot take the meaning of 'shun / turn away' in this context.

(A, Mṣb, TA.) — ضَرَبَ عَنْهُ He turned away a person or thing from him [or it]; as also ضَرَبَ عَنْهُ (TA:) [or] ضَرَبَ عَنْهُ signifies, (S, Mṣb,) or signifies also, (TA,) and (Mṣb, TA) so does ضَرَبَ عَنْهُ (Mṣb, K, TA,) [the latter app. for ضَرَبَ نَفْسَهُ عَنْهُ,] † He turned away from, avoided, shunned, or left, him, or it; (S,* Mṣb, K,* TA;*) namely, a person, (TA,) or a thing.

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [4]

This rendering can also be seen in verse 43.5

043.005

Should We take this Reminder away from you **and ignore you (turn away)** because you are a nation who has transgressed all limits?

an

أَفَنَضْرِبُ عَنْكُمْ

(n)dhrīb

Illustration - Joseph Islam

However, it appears from certain Arabic lexicons that the phrase 'Idribohunna' **does not necessarily require the preposition 'an'** to make the rendition 'shun - turn away from' **operative**. Therefore, the word 'Idribohunna' in the Quran can still retain the meaning to 'turn away from - shun' without necessitating the requirement of the preposition 'an'.

Please see the example in the following excerpt below.

(A, Mṣb, TA.) — ضَرَبَ عَنْهُ + *He turned away a person or thing from him [or it]; as also*
ضَرَبَ : (TA:) ضَرَبَ عَنْهُ signifies, (S, Mṣb,) or signifies also, (TA,) and (Mṣb, TA) so does ضَرَبَ عَنْهُ, (Mṣb, K, TA,) [the latter app. for ضَرَبَ نَفْسَهُ عَنْهُ,] + *He turned away from, avoided, shunned, or left, him, or it; (S, * Mṣb, K, * TA; *)* namely, a person, (TA,) or a thing.

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [5]

This rendering also finds support with the overarching philosophy depicted by the Quran which underscores how marriage institutions should be managed in **kindness, respect and without causing harm to one another**.

Other authors have also sought support from trusted Arabic lexicons to make a similar case.

"Nevertheless, narrowing its meaning in a given instance is not as difficult as it may first seem, because in Arabic verbs acquire various connotations only in combination with specific prepositions. For instance *daraba* acquires the meaning of "to separate" in combination with *baina*, and the meaning of "to turn away from," "to leave," "to avoid," and "to shun" in combination with 'an. In the passage in question, *daraba* is not combined with either of these prepositions. **Yet Lane points out that the command form of the verb, *udribu*, with or without 'an, can mean "ignore," "pay no attention to," or "turn away from," as well as "hit," "beat," or "strike."** Hence, *udribu-hunna*, could mean, "beat them" or "strike them," or alternatively, "turn them away," "ignore them," or "shun them." [6]

Please see related article [1] below for a deeper analysis of the phrase 'Idribohunna'

(3) THE 'BEATING' VERSE AND NO SEPARATION IN TIME (VERSE 4.34)

As the meaning of 'Idribohunna' is generally accepted to mean 'beat', many Islamic scholars have served to contextualise the beating to imply a corrective approach.

Muslim theologians split the directives into a **3 step disciplinary process** which from a cursory glance seems supported if only the apparent severity of the successive remedial steps is considered.

However, if one re-reads verse 4:34 in Arabic (as below) and in its wider context, one will note that a separation in time is **not necessarily** conclusive in the verse (i.e. step 1 followed by step 2 and step 3 **as disciplinary steps to be taken over a period of time**).

In particular, the Arabic word 'wa' does **not necessarily** indicate a separation in time but an action that can be performed simultaneously or indeed in a relatively short sequence (not separated by any significant time spans).

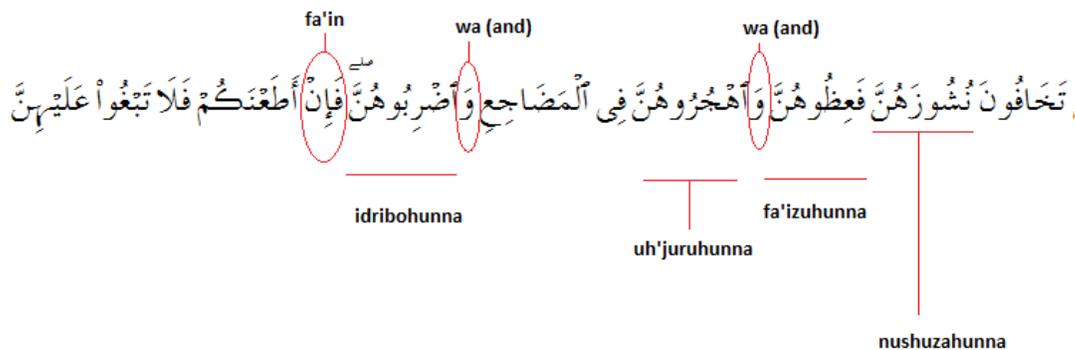
On the contrary, if the separator 'wa' is to be taken as a separation of disciplinary steps (as is generally accepted), there is no indication in the Quran as to what those time periods then would be. Furthermore, there is no objective criterion to judge each stage, leaving the matter entirely at the subjective whim of the husband who may already be in an extremely aggrieved, possibly aggressed state. It is also useful to note that there is an absence of any similar 'corrective' steps when the husband is similarly guilty of 'nushuz' (ill conduct, rise against, desertion, rebellion, dissonance, belligerence or hostility) against the wife (4:128) supporting the notion that verse 4:34 intends no real separation in time.

Alternative translation:

004:034 (Part)

"...As from those whom you fear ill-conduct (**Arabic: nushuzahunna**) advise them (**Arabic: fa'izuhunna**) and (**Arabic: wa**) forsake their (**Arabic: uh'juruhunna**) beds and (**Arabic: wa**) separate from them (**Arabic: idribohunna**); but if they return to obedience, then do not seek against them a way. Indeed, God is Most High, The Greatest"

Please also note that the Arabic word '**fa'izuhunna**' is formed from its root (waw-ayn-za) and is not restricted to mean 'admonish' exclusively. Rather, it also carries the meaning to give good advice or counsel, to remind one of the result of affairs, preach, advise and to warn.



EXAMPLES OF THE USAGE OF 'WA' (AND)

Reading the next verse 4:35 regards arbitration, one notes that the prefixed conjunction 'wa' is clearly **not** being used as a separation in time, but as an approach to be carried out simultaneously or in immediate succession.

004:035

“And if you fear a breach between the two, then appoint an arbiter (**Arabic: hakamamin**) from his people **and (Arabic: wa)** an arbiter (**Arabic: hakamamin**) from her people; if they both desire agreement, God will effect harmony between them, surely God is Knowing, Aware.”

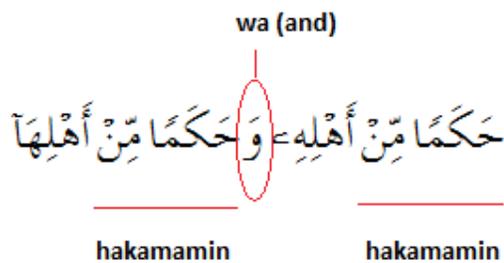


Illustration - Joseph Islam

Even in the very next verse (4:36) we note the word 'wa' being used when referring to God's sole worship. No one would argue that this is a separation in time but rather an action that must be carried out simultaneously (i.e. Worship God at the same time as associating no other deity with Him).

004:036 (Part)

"...Serve God, **and (Arabic: wa)** join not any partners with Him..."

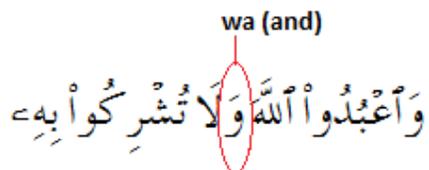


Illustration - Joseph Islam

There are countless examples of this in the Quran such as obeying God **and (wa)** the messenger (64:12) which is a simultaneous action.

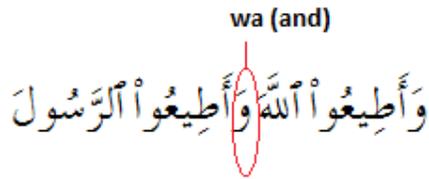


Illustration - Joseph Islam

Furthermore, one notes in the command with regards ablution (5:6), the conjunction 'and' (wa) being used as a sequence separator ("When you stand up for prayer then wash your faces, **and (wa)** your hands till the elbows **and (wa)** wipe your heads **and (wa)** your feet till the ankles"). There is no indication in this verse that these actions need to be carried out over a great period of time other than implying a **general sequence**.

Therefore, given the possible argument that all actions are occurring simultaneously or in short general sequence in verse 4:34, one could arguably contend with the interpretation of a three step disciplinary process culminating in the beating of the wife. In this case, the latter 'beat' would certainly not be the most conclusive / appropriate rendition not only argued linguistically, but also in light of the Quran's overarching philosophy of **mutual respect and love**.

Rather, it can be argued that '**idribhunna**' refers to the process of separating or shunning as by way of an example underlying the conviction in one's approach. This is certainly the case when the predicament is regarding the very serious matter of '**Nushuz**' (ill conduct, rise against, desertion, rebellion, dissonance, belligerence or hostility).

The simultaneous or sequential nature of the actions are also reinforced in the same verse where the Arabic '**Fa'in**' (best rendered but if/ then if) is actually being used as a **sequence in time** (If they correct their behaviour, seek not a way against them).

One must always take the most consistent rendering in light of all the Quran's narratives and overarching philosophy, i.e. the **best meaning possible**.

039:018

"Those who listen to the word **then follow the best of it**; those are they whom God has guided, and those it is who are the men of understanding"

(4) IF THE HUSBAND IS GUILTY OF 'NUSHUZ', A WIFE ALSO HAS RECOURSE TO SEEK REDRESS

The Quranic directives protect both parties and if a man is guilty of 'Nushuz', a wife also has recourse.

004:128

"If a wife fears cruelty or desertion (**Arabic: Nushuzun**) on her husband's part, there is no blame on them if they arrange an amicable settlement between themselves; and such settlement is best; even though men's souls are swayed by greed. But if ye do good and practice self-restraint, God is well-acquainted with all that ye do"

(5) WHAT IS ISLAM'S EARLIEST EXTANT SOURCE / TRADITION REFERRING TO BEATING?

Islam's earliest historic source is a professional storyteller, the biographer and historian **Ibn Ishaq**. The mention of beating in this context is found in his Sira (Biography) of Muhammad ^(pbuh) in a section called the 'Farewell Pilgrimage'. Please note that Ibn Ishaq was drawing from a common pool of traditionalists many decades before the works of 'collectors of Ahadith' such as Al-Bukhari started to take canon. (This specifically is a discussion outside the remit of this article and thus will not be further elaborated here).

See article: [Ibn Ishaq](#)

"You have rights over your wives and they have rights over you. You have the right that they should not defile your bed and that they should not behave with open unseemliness. If they do, God allows you to put them in separate rooms **and to beat them but not with severity**" [7]

(6) SO WHAT HAS 'POSSIBLY' HAPPENED?

It is possible that at the Prophet's time, this verse was understood in a non aggressive manner and the term '**idribohunna**' was understood as to 'shun them'.

However, over the passage of time, many early Arabs used this word to find justifications with regards to their approach taking the most aggressive rendering of the word to justify their actions and to pander to their pre-Islamic cultural sensitivities. Once this aggressive rendition was proliferated, **many traditions** were formulated in the name of the Prophet to counter it as for example, '**I (the prophet) wanted one thing, but God wanted another**'. Notwithstanding the problems and subsequent questions this narrative raises such as 'is the Prophet more merciful than the Creator?' and 'How could the Prophet's desire run contrary to the Lord's decree?' many counter narratives came into circulation.

Future Islamic theologians no doubt in this scenario would have had a tremendous task of attempting to sift through and reconcile the alleged traditions in the name of the Prophet with the

directives of the Quran. It is quite possible that the development of the 3 steps found its root in early Islamic jurisprudence given the variances of opinion. However, within the scriptures own light, this problem does not arise unless one attempts to reconcile it with these [secondary source narratives](#).

However clearly, **only** God knows best what happened and this suggestion is only propounded as a mere possibility.

(7) ARGUMENTS AGAINST SEEKING AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION

It is imperative in my humble view to consider a few strong contentions against seeking an alternative interpretation as has been shared in this article.

To allow for intellectual honesty, I feel that readers should consider these contentions with an open, yet critical mind.

1. Why did the Quran make use of a **well-known word in Arabic** such as '[daraba](#)' which could lend itself to be nuanced aggressively **with ease** if this meaning was not the intention of the verse? In other words, why did the Quran not simply make use of an alternative, unequivocal Arabic term instead, which would leave no room for doubt to the reader? This is especially when the verb in question is found with its intensive usage (to strike / beat) throughout the Quran in non-marital contexts and the Quran claims to be clear Arabic speech. (Please see article [1] below in this regard which discusses the verb '[idrib](#)' as used in the Quran).
2. Why does the vast Arabic Islamic literature not proliferate the specific understanding of the alternative meaning (i.e. to shun) of the Arabic term '[idhrib](#)'? (Please see section above for a possible reason).
3. The context of the alleged 'strike' is only a corrective measure intended to be invoked in the very serious situation of '[nushuz](#)' by the wife (ill conduct, rise against, desertion, rebellion, dissonance, belligerence or hostility) in the husband's capacity as '[qawamun](#)' (maintainer, protector, guardian, supporter of his family). It is not intended to sanction an indiscriminate unleash of anger of a short tempered brute of a husband on a defenseless, innocent wife on a mere whim. Its intention is not to 'hurt' but to use 'sufficient, measured restraint' to redress the precarious situation that has occurred. This is after all other avenues have been exhausted in a private capacity between both the husband and the wife and before the matter becomes public and arbitration becomes necessary. In the end, the actions of the husband will be judged by God who has tasked him with specific responsibility.
4. The primary guidance of the Quran was presented in a particular context to a particular people of a certain culture. Any future applicability of the verse is dependant on the context of the particular situation and culture.

5. There is a difference between 'domestic abuse' and 'effective measured restraint / control' as a last resort when all other possibilities have been exhausted to redress a precarious situation.
6. One cannot impose modern Western sensibilities on God's wisdom for humankind or a particular people of a certain time.
7. The Quran grants the husband the responsibility to primarily provide support, guard, maintain his household including his wife and children (qawamun 4:43), to ensure empathy and love in his household and to redress the balance if that equilibrium is subject to foul play.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Muslims often do a great disservice to the Quran and its immense power to suggest that the Quran can **only** be understood by appointed clergymen who tacitly rest control over its interpretation or once full knowledge of Arabic and its grammar has been grasped. Of course arguably, no serious student of the Quran will ever doubt that an extensive knowledge of classical Arabic is an extremely powerful tool to aid the study of the Quran. Nor would they doubt that it is imperative to critically evaluate the opinions of other scholars.

However, the internal logic and consistency of the Quran is **so coherent** that it transcends language and at times can be used to expose weaknesses of accepted meanings and the collective opinions of others.

The case of '**Idribohunna**' to imply 'beating of one's wife' **may** provide one such example.

Related Article:

- (1) [A Deeper Look at the Word 'Daraba' \(To Beat\) in Context of Wives](#)

REFERENCES

[1] LANE. E.W, *Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 5, Page 1775*

Highlights marked in red on the lexicon excerpt are my own insertions. They have no bearing on the original text other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

[2] ASAD. M, *The Message of THE QUR'AN; Dar Al-Andlus Limited, 3 Library Ramp Gibraltar, Spain 1980, Verse 2:72, Note 57*

[3] PENRICE. J, *A Dictionary and Glossary of the Koran*, Adam Publishers & Distributors, First Edition 1873, Reprinted in India 1991, Page 87

[4] LANE. E.W, *Edward Lanes Lexicon*, Williams and Norgate 1863; *Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon* 1968, Volume 5, Page 1779

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[5] *Ibid.*

[6] LANG. J, *Losing My Religion: A Call for Help*, Amana Publications, First Edition, Page 429 Author Reference [93] Edward Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, Fredrick Unger Publishing (1956), page 1779, first column, two-thirds down the page.

Highlights marked in bold black are my own insertions. They have no bearing on the original text other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

[7] GUILLAUME. A, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, Oxford University Press, Page 651

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