

The Quran and its Message

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Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

ARE INTOXICANTS FORBIDDEN (HARAM) IN THE QURAN?

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There is wide acceptance in Muslim thought that the Quran categorically condemns the use of intoxicants. However, there are also some Muslims that assert that as the Quran does not use the condemnation 'haram' with respect to alcoholic beverages (as it does for say swine flesh in 5:3), therefore, it cannot be classed as 'forbidden'.

Rather it is asserted, the narratives must be understood as a cautionary note. Therefore, (the argument continues) intoxicants can be consumed, but with responsibility and moderation.

This latter claim will be briefly analysed in view of the Quran to assess it's validity as a viable argument.

KHAMAR

The main word used by the Quran to describe intoxicants (wine, alcohol etc) is 'khamar' which can also be read in a historical narrative captured by the Quran between Prophet Joseph and a prisoner (pressing wine 12:36-12:41).

'Khamar', inherently carries the meaning of concealment, to cover and something which clouds or obscures the intellect. The root also forms words such as Khumur (plural) to denote a woman's head covering (khimar) or a man's turban.

It is also absolutely correct to assert that the Quran does not make use of the categorical term 'haram' when it refers to 'khamar'. However, this point will be further contextualised later in the article.

From the Quran's narratives, it is clear that 'khamar' has both good and bad uses. This does not inherently suggest that 'khamar' is itself 'bad'. Rather, it is the specific context of 'khamar' and its usage that attracts condemnation.

002.219 (Part)

"They ask you concerning wine / liquor / intoxicants (Arabic: Khamri) and games of chance. Say: "In them is great sin, and some profit, for men; but the sin is greater than the profit..."

It is significant to note that the above verse simply addresses the state of intoxicants and games of chance. It acknowledges that on balance the sin within them is far greater. Therefore, one better understands the condemnation both vices attract in the following verse.

005.090

"O ye who believe! wine / liquor / intoxicants (Arabic: Khamru) and games of chance and idols and divining arrows are **only an abomination of Satan's handiwork**. Leave it aside / avoid it / shun it (Arabic: Fa-ijtanibuhu) in order that you may succeed"

005.091

"Satan seeks only to cast among you **enmity and hatred by means of strong drink (Arabic: Khamri) and games of chance, and to turn you from remembrance of God and from (His) worship. So will you (be) the ones to abstain? (Arabic: fahal antum muntahun)"**

The powerful statement at the end of the verse is worth pondering:

"fahal antum muntahun"?

So will you (be) the ones to abstain? / Will you not then abstain, will you not desist?

This statement is very significant.

IJTANIBU

The term used at the helm of the condemnation is 'ijtanibu'. It is here that some Muslims assert that as the term used falls shy of 'haram' (as used in 5:3), then this guidance amounts to a cautionary note. Quite apart from not submitting completely to a cautionary note by God, especially when the phrase "Will you not then abstain?" is given, the assertion takes no account of how the term 'ijtanibu' is used elsewhere by the Quran. To counter this assertion, another (more traditional) opinion then argues for 'ijtanibu' to be regarded as a term more potent in condemnation than the term 'haram'.

Quite apart from the unnecessary debates with these semantics, the Quran actually provides clear guidance on this matter.

016.036

"And certainly We raised in every nation a messenger saying: Serve God and **shun (Arabic: ijtanibu) false deities (Arabic Taghut)**. So there were some of them whom God guided and there were others against whom error was due. So therefore travel in the land, then see what was the end of the rejecters"

No sincere believer or academic student of the Quran's narratives would argue that shunning 'false deities' has been imparted in a cautionary or advisory capacity by the Quran. This point becomes even more significant when it is noted that the directive to 'shun' (ijtanibu) false deities has been used in conjunction with serving the one true God. As a pair, it is almost impossible to accept that this advice is a cautionary note.

022.030

“Such (is the Pilgrimage): whoever honours the sacred rites of God, for him it is good in the Sight of his Lord. Lawful to you are cattle, except those mentioned to you (as exception): but shun **(Arabic: fa-ijtanibu)** the abomination of idols, and shun **(Arabic: wa-ijtanibu)** the word that is false”

049.012

“ O you who believe! Avoid **(Arabic: ijtanibu)** suspicion / assumptions **(Arabic: zani)** as much (as possible): Indeed some suspicion / assumptions is a sin: And spy not on each other and do not backbite. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Nay, you would hate it. And fear God: Indeed, God is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful”

'ijtanibu' has the same root as 'janaba'. Given the roots multifaceted uses in the Quran, it clearly means to put a thing aside, to alienate, to estrange, to avoid and to shun.

Having read the above uses, it becomes difficult to accept the assertion that the shunning of intoxication is merely of 'cautionary note'. Used in much the same manner as shunning false deities 'ijtanabu' is just as potent a condemnation as is 'haram'. Both should be clearly avoided.

GRADUAL PROHIBITION OR A WIDER MEANING?

Another claim that is at times made, is that intoxicants are only forbidden in prayer. The following verse is used as support, not only by those that do not see intoxication as a 'total prohibition' (rather, advisory). However, this verse is also made use of by the majority traditionalists that claim intoxication became gradually forbidden.

004:043

“O you who believe! Approach not prayers with a mind befogged **(Arabic Sukara)**, until ye can understand all that ye say..”

In fact, even a cursory analysis reveals that the above verse does not even make use of the word 'khamar'. The Arabic word 'sukara' that is used is not restricted to intoxicants. Rather, it captures all those conditions in which a mind becomes befogged and where clarity is compromised. This can be due to anger, confused judgment due to grief or indeed, any situation which may distract one from mental clarity or focus. Therefore, any mental state when focus is compromised falls within the understanding of the term 'sukara'. Intoxicants are merely one example.

It can be argued therefore, that the real essence of the verse is not so much with regards 'sukara' or the gradual prohibition of intoxicants. Rather, the focus of the verse is to underscore the understanding that **one must be in a state where they can concentrate on their prayers and know what they are saying during it.**

This understanding also begs the question of whether reading a prayer in a foreign tongue with no comprehension, mind or focus is akin to reading prayers with a mind befogged? Is this then (and as such), a violation of verse 4:43 above? A valid question indeed.

EARTHLY WINE AND HEAVENLY SIMILITUDES ARE NOT SYNONYMOUS

One finds in the Quran, similitudes of the earthly wine given to the inhabitants of paradise. It is here that one further notes an allusion to earthly intoxicants as contributing to ill effects such as headiness and loss of mental stability (Arabic: yunzafun). It is also on the earthly plane that satanic input combined with an unstable mind can wreak havoc both personally and to society. As heavenly similitudes of wine will be devoid of such effects as mental instability, dark influences will also be absent to the inhabitants of paradise. Therefore these drinks will not be the cause of any recourse to evil as is often the case on earth.

047.015

"(Here is) a Parable of the Garden which the righteous are promised: in it are rivers of water incorruptible; rivers of milk of which the taste never changes; **rivers of wine (Arabic: Khamrin), delicious for the drinkers**; and rivers of honey pure and clear. In it there are for them all kinds of fruits; and forgiveness from their Lord. (Can those in such Bliss) be compared to such as shall dwell for ever in the Fire, and be given, to drink, boiling water, so that it cuts up their bowels / intestines (into pieces)?

037.045-47

"A cup shall be made to go round them from water running out of springs, White, delicious to the drinkers, free from headiness; nor will they suffer intoxication / exhaustion / deprivation of intellectual faculties (Arabic: yunzafun)".

FINAL THOUGHTS

Whether 'haram' or 'ijtanabu', both Quranic terms make it absolutely clear that the directive is to stay clear of, alienate, estrange, avoid and shun. This is by God's command.

Intoxicants, in this case, are no different. Therefore, the claim that intoxicants can be consumed with responsibility and moderation, finds no support from the Quran.

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