

The Quran and its Message

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سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

PRAY AS WE HAVE TAUGHT YOU HOW TO PRAY - USING VERSE 2.239 AS SUPPORT FOR A FIXED FORM OF PRAYER

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It is very common for many Muslims to use verses 2:238-39 as proof for the existence of a **specific form of prayer**. In many discussions this verse is also used as a conduit for the Sunna implying that extra sources are thus required to interpret the Quran.

The purpose of this article is not to contest the Sunna but to indicate clearly that there is no support from these verses to **restrict** the interpretation in a manner to sanction a specific form of prayer.

Let us note the verse:

002:238-39

"Be guardians for your prayers and to the middle prayer and stand up truly obedient to God. But if you fear (**Arabic: khiftum**), then (say your prayers) on foot or on horseback; and when you are secure, then remember (**Arabic: fa-udh'kuru**) God, as He has taught you what you did not know (**Arabic: ma lam takunu ta'lamun**)"

فَاذْكُرُوا اللَّهَ كَمَا عَلَّمَكُم مَّا لَمْ تَكُونُوا تَعْلَمُونَ

ma lam takunu ta'lamun

[Illustration - Joseph Islam](#)

THE ARGUMENT:

God says in the Quran that 'pray as we have taught you how to pray'. This means that they were taught something which is not captured by the Quran. Therefore, we need the Sunna.

RESPONSE:

The first point to note is that the above verse does not instruct the Prophet alone to **'Pray as we have taught you how to pray'** as is often misquoted.

Instead, the verse instructs **all believers** to **'remember'** (Arabic: **dhikr**) God as they have been taught to. 'Dhikr' and 'salat' are not necessarily synonymous terms (62:10). There is also support from the Quran that 'dhikr' (continuous remembrance) is actually better than prayer (29:45).

WHAT HAD BEEN TAUGHT TO THEM AND WHAT DID THEY NOT KNOW? - IS THIS A REFERENCE TO A SPECIFIC FORM OF PRAYER?

There is no conclusive proof by virtue of the verse that this is a reference to a specific form of prayer.

Given the background of the Prophet and his people before accepting Islam, the prayer of the 'mushrikeen' (pagans) was historically ritualistic and devoid of prayer aspects of true monotheists. This is evident from the Quran itself where God says:

008:035

"And their prayer (Arabic: salatuhum) before the House is nothing but whistling and clapping of hands; taste then the chastisement, for you disbelieved"

Therefore, it is clear from the above verse that the 'mushrikeen' (pagans) did practice 'salat' (prayers), but it amounted to nothing more than 'mukaan' (whistling) and 'tasdiyatah' (clapping).

What the ex-pagans (i.e. new believers) had been **'taught'** was **a new form of monotheistic 'dhikr'** which also encompassed 'salat' and not a **specific** form.

The new form included many aspects **clearly stated by the Quran** which they were not accustomed to or knew.

مَا لَمْ تَكُونُوا تَعْلَمُونَ

ma lam takunu ta'lamun

(what you did not know)

Some of these new aspects of monotheistic worship included:

- The details of ablution (4:43; 5:6)
- A need for a direction - Qiblah, specific for the 'believers' (Mu'mins) (2.143-44)
- Garments (7:31)
- Allusion of times: (4:103; 11:114; 17:78; 24:58; 30:18; 2:238; 20:58)
- That prayers must be observed on time (4:103)

- Followers of the previous scripture to observe their Qiblah and the Believers (Mu'mins) their own Qiblah (2:145)
- Prayer involves prostration (Sujood - 4:102; 48:29)
- There is more than one prayer (Prayer in plural used - Salawat) (2:238)
- There is a general form to prayer (2:238-39).
- Standing position (3:39; 4:102)
- Bowing down and prostrating (4:102; 22:26; 38:24; 48:29)
- Form is not required during times of emergencies, fear, and unusual circumstances (2:239)
- A mention of a call to prayer and congregation prayer (62:9)
- A warning not to abandon prayer as was done by people before (19:58-59) but to establish prayer (Numerous references)
- The purpose of prayer - To remember God alone (6:162; 20:14)
- Prayer involves utterance (4:43)
- The purpose to protect from sins (29:45)
- What to do in danger and the shortening of prayer (4:101)
- Garments and mention of a Masjid, or a place of prayer (7:31)
- The tone of prayer (17:110)
- There is a leader of prayer (4:102)

All the above was **taught** by the Quran.

Therefore, the reference to '**what they did not know**' in verse 2:239 is not a reference **to a specific form of prayer only captured by the Sunna**, but rather, aspects of prayer as noted above from the Quran which the Pagans were not aware of.

FINAL THOUGHTS

- To understand verse 2:239 as sanctioning a particular form of 'sunna' is not supported by context.
- To understand the directive in verse 2:239 as only applying to the Prophet is also not supported by the Arabic grammar or context. This is a verse which is being directed to all believers.
- To understand 'dhikr' simply as a set of prayer rituals is also an unnecessary restriction of its interpretation. 'Dhikr' in the Quran covers all forms of remembrance of God including prayer but is not restricted to it.
- The Arabic term '**ma lam takanu ta'lamun**' (What you did not know) mentioned in 2:239 combined with 'dhikr' is most likely to cover **all general aspects of monotheistic 'dhikr'** (remembrance of God) as dictated by the Quran and includes prayer. This is to make a clear distinction between a monotheistic prayer as compared to a pagan ritual such as one which includes whistling and clapping.

- What was unknown to the 'pagans' was not the need to pray but the various aspects of true monotheistic prayer which the Quran covers in detail. Hence, these aspects were taught to them by the Quran and implemented into a form of worship.

Therefore, verse 2:239 does not sanction a particular Sunna. It merely acknowledges those aspects of monotheistic prayer that were taught by the Quran. This is what the verse refers to when it says "then remember God, as He has taught you what you did not know"

Related Articles:

- (1) [How Can We Learn to Pray if We Don't Have Hadith to Teach Us?](#)
- (2) [Do We Have to Pray in Arabic?](#)

[See Prayer Section](#)

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