

The Quran and its Message

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Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

THE SABBATH BREAKERS: APES & SWINE - A METAPHORICAL OR LITERAL READING?

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An interesting narrative of the Quran refers to a community that received punitive redress by Divine will for having transgressed the Sabbath after having ratified a firm covenant to observe it (4:154). A community by the sea had been trialled (*Arabic: bala*) where their fish (*Arabic: Hut*) would come to them on the Day of Sabbath and not on other days when Sabbath was not being observed (7:163). This caused them to yield to the temptation of catching the fish by breaking the Sabbath for which they received Divine punishment.

VERSES IN QUESTION

002:065

"And indeed, you had already known about those who transgressed among you concerning the Sabbath, and We said to them, **"Be apes, despised."**

005:060

"Say, "Shall I inform you of [what is] worse than that as recompense from God? [It is that of] those whom God has cursed and with whom He became angry and **made of them apes and swine** and slaves of Taghut (False deities). Those are worse in position and further astray from the sound way."

007:166

"So when they revoltingly persisted / insolently transgressed in what they were forbidden, We said to them **"Be apes, despised"**

These verses have been a source of much discussion with some interpretations seeking a **metaphorical reading** of the text, whilst others in the main, a **literal reading** implying that the Sabbath breakers were **actually transformed** into apes and swine.

THE CONTEXT - ONLY A CERTAIN COMMUNITY WERE PUNISHED

Notwithstanding the fact that the narrative refers to a **particular community by the sea (7:163)**, what is clear to note from the Quranic text is that there is no warrant to assert that **all Jews** were transgressors or that all Jews of a particular period were punished. The Quran remains explicit that there are righteous amongst the People of the Book.

003:113-114

"**Not all of them are alike: Of the People of the Book are a portion that stand: They rehearse the verses of God all night long, and they prostrate themselves in adoration. They believe in God and the Last Day; they enjoin what is right, and forbid what is wrong; and they hasten in good deeds: They are in the ranks of the righteous"**

007.159

"**Of the people of Moses there is a section who guide and do justice in the light of truth."**

INTERPRETATION

Admittedly, a modern reader's inclination would arguably be to seek a metaphorical interpretation of these verses. In some isolated cases, this has also been the view of classical interpretations. Such interpretations seem to suggest that the change was not literal in the sense that the Sabbath-breakers were physically transformed, but rather, it was their hearts that were changed into a bestial condition.

Although there is some support in classical literature that the usage of the Arabic terms for ape (*qiradah*) and swine (*khinzir*) can be used metaphorically, the construct of the verses of the Quran certainly seem to imply a **literal transformation** with **no indication** from the text that this is to be read as a similitude or metaphorically.

This is supported by the following verse, where it is evident that where a similitude is to be advanced, the Quran makes this **absolutely clear**.

062.005

"**The likeness (mathalu) of those who are entrusted with the Law of Moses (Torah), yet apply it not, is as the likeness (kamathali) of the donkey / ass who carries books. Wretched is the likeness of the people who deny the revelations of God. And God guides not the wrongdoers"**

Such a metaphorical 'likeness' is **not** expressed in the verses of the Sabbath breakers.

Furthermore, the Quran remains explicit that this punishment was a '**curse**' and was to remain an '**exemplary punishment / deterrent**' not only for the people of the time, but as a reminder etched in the memories of those that followed.

005:060 (part)

"Say, "Shall I inform you of [what is] worse than that as recompense from God? [It is that of] those whom God has cursed (* la'ana) and with whom He became angry and made of them apes and swine..."

004.047

"O you who have been given the Book, believe in what We have revealed confirming that which you possess, before We efface faces and turn them on their backs or We curse them as We cursed (* la'ana) companions of the Sabbath (of old time). The commandment of God is always executed."

* La'ana - the act of cursing, to curse.

002.066

"So We made it an exemplary punishment / a deterrent (* Arabic: nakalan) to those in front of them and to those after them, and a lesson to those who fear God."

The Arabic word '* nakalan' implies an exemplary punishment as can be seen in the narrative concerning Pharaoh who transgressed all bounds.

079:025

"But God did punish him, (and made an) example of him (Arabic: nakala), in the Hereafter, as in this life"

DIFFICULTIES OF A LITERAL INTERPRETATION

The idea of humans undergoing transformation / transmogrification by Divine will as a punitive response to disbelief is admittedly extremely difficult to grasp, especially for many modern readers. This would appear a violation of natural laws and thus there would be an inclination to seek an interpretation somewhat similar to the stance taken by many revisionists, that attempt to understand Biblical and Quranic portents in more metaphorical terms.

However, from the Quran itself, it can be argued that many such portents which would appear miraculous today, were sent to the communities of yore, but stopped by **explicit decree**.

017:059 (part)

"And nothing has prevented / stopped Us (*mana'ana*) from sending signs / portents, except that the former generations denied them..."

The above verse remains an **explicit confirmation** by the Quran that portents **were sent**, but had now ceased.

The oft quoted response that '*God does not change his ways*' is usually **misrepresented and quoted out of context**. In fact, God's immutable approach is explicitly stated in the context of the **punishment He delivers on transgressing nations** and has **nothing** to do with His laws of nature. In other words, God does not change the 'goal posts' nor is He unfair, but remains perfectly consistent

and absolute in His judgment, including the manner in which He delivers it. **Please see article [1] below.**

035.043

“On account of their arrogance in the land and their plotting of evil, but the plotting of evil will only encompass its own people. Now are they but waiting for the way the ancients were dealt with? But no change will you find in God's way (**Arabic: Sunnata-Ilahi**): and never will you find in God's way (**Arabic: Sunnata-Ilahi**) any change”

See also verses 33:62; 40:85 and 48:23.

THE ANCIENT JEWISH COMMUNITY WERE FAMILIAR WITH THE NARRATIVES

The fact that the Quran expected the Children of Israel to be familiar with narratives which involved such a transformation is given by the Quranic text:

002:065

"**And indeed, you had already known about those who transgressed among you concerning the Sabbath, and We said to them, "Be apes, despised."**

Punishments which meant that transgressors were transformed into **apes** is arguably well etched into Jewish legends seemingly supportive of the Quranic text.

As noted in Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*,

The old Aggada already knows the punishment by transformation into apes. In the wicked generation of Enoch, human faces are transformed into monkey faces (Gen. Rab. XXIII.6) According to the Talmud, the builders of the tower of Babel were transformed into apes (Sanh. 109a) Ginzberg (VI, 85.452), therefore, sees a Jewish legend in the story of the Koran that Jewish Sabbath desecrators are transformed into apes.[x] Ginzberg (VI 85.458) cleverly interprets the tannaitic-amoraic Aggada, that the Sabbath wood-gatherer descended from the family **בֵּית קִיפָא**, , house of monkeys, to mean that, having desecrated the Sabbath, he was transformed into an ape.” [1]

⁴⁵² Sifre N., 105, 113, 114, 133; Sifre Z., 103–105; Sifra 24.12; Shabbat 96b; Baba Batra 119b. To exculpate—partly at least—the father of the pious virgins (comp. vol. III, pp. 391, *seq.*), it is said that Zelophehad was willing to sacrifice his life that the people might learn by his death that the desecration of the Sabbath is a very grievous sin; comp. Targum Yerushalmi Num. 15.32–35 and *Imre No'am*, at the end of Shelah who gives a Midrash, not Targum, as source for his statement. See also notes 813, 814. Philo, *Moses*, 2(3).27–28

(which reads: They found Moses in the house of study; this is in agreement with Sifra), and *Special. Leg., de Col. Par*, 8, describes the episode of the Sabbath breaker in a manner similar to that found in rabbinic sources. According to Tosefta Yebamot 1.10, and parallel passages in Babli and Yerushalmi, the high-priestly family of Caiaphas (אֵפֵי, "ape") hailed from Bet Mekoshesh, "the house of the stick-gatherer". In view of the legend—undoubtedly Jewish—found in Koran 2.60, that Moses transformed the Sabbath breakers into apes, one is inclined to trace some connection between the Caiaphas ("apes") and their place of origin, "the house of the stick-gatherer", the *ששקש* being the typical case of the Sabbath breaker. See note 790.

REFERENCE [2]

The Quran made no attempt to challenge the knowledge of the Jews.

CAN GOD TRANSFORM HIS CREATION IF HE SO WILLS?

One notes the following passages of interest in the Quran:

036:065

"This Day, We will set a seal upon their mouths, and their hands shall speak to Us, and their feet shall bear witness of what they earned."

036:066

"And if We willed We would have certainly obliterated their eyes, then they would run about groping for the way, but how should they see?"

036:067

"And if We willed, **We would have certainly transformed them (*masakha*)** in their place, then they would not be able to proceed, nor will they return."

036:068

"And he whom We grant a long life, We reverse him in creation, then will they not use their intellect?"

The Arabic verb '**masakha**' (36:67), which is used only once in the entire Quran means to **change, or transform**.

Even though different scholars have argued that this reference is to be understood in exclusively **eschatological** (dealing with the afterlife) terms, this assertion is not entirely convincing from a survey of the Quranic verses. It appears that though indeed the context is a dialogue that takes place

on the Day of Reckoning (36:5), God's will has been expressed in a manner as if to suggest that He has **always** retained the capacity to transform disbelievers. (36:67)

FINAL THOUGHTS

Although a metaphorical interpretation cannot be completely ruled out despite a dearth of supporting evidence, the Quran **on balance** seems to strongly lean towards presenting the curse of the Sabbath-breakers as a **literal transformation**.

This has been argued by the following main points.

- The Quran presents no indication in the text that the verses are to be read metaphorically but presents the account in a literal manner. (2:65 "Be apes, despised"; 5:60 "made of them apes and swine"; 7:166 "Be apes, despised").
- God has made it clear in verses when He implies a *metaphorical interpretation* by presenting the verse as a similitude (62:5 "...is as the likeness (*kamathali*) of the donkey / ass who carries books..."). This is not the case with the verses dealing with the Sabbath-breakers.
- The Quran does not correct Jewish legend that transgressing communities have been transformed but **confirms** their knowledge (2:65 - "...And indeed, you had already known about those who transgressed among you concerning the Sabbath...").
- God makes it clear that if it is His will, He **can** transform (*masakha*) those of His creation that transgress (36:67).
- The punishment of the Sabbath-breakers was to serve as a **curse** (5:60, 4:47 - *la'ana*) and an **exemplary punishment** (2:66 - *nakal*) akin to those inflicted on others that transgressed all bounds (example Pharaoh: 79:29).
- Portents which would appear miraculous today were sent to communities before, but were subsequently stopped by Divine decree (17:59).

From a purely academic perspective and with a view to remain true to any ancient text, one must remain careful not to impose their modern worldviews into their readings. Otherwise, one would become guilty of a highly subjective '*eisegesis*' as opposed to conducting a more balanced, objective '*exegesis*' of the classical text under scrutiny.

Related Article:

- (1) [Understanding the term 'Sunna' from a Quran's Perspective](#)

REFERENCES

[1] HELLER. B, Ginzberg's Legends of the Jews, The Jewish Quarterly Review New Series, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Apr., 1934), pp. 393-418, Published by: University of Pennsylvania Press, pages 402-3. Note [x] refers to [29] in the literature. The note is as follows:

Sura 4.50 also dwells upon this punishment for Sabbath desecrators. Wicked scholars are transformed into apes and swine (5.65). There are also Israelites who meet the same fate (Sura 7.166).

[2] GINZBERG. L, **The Legends of the Jews**, Philadelphia Jewish Publication Society of America 1928, pages 84-85,
[Online] <https://archive.org/details/legendsofjews06ginz>, [Accessed] 28th February 2014

Highlights marked in red 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.

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