

# The Quran and its Message

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سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

## WASHING OR WIPING THE FEET IN WUDU (ABLUTION)?

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An ancient debate which has been cemented into practice is the verse with regards ablution in Chapter 5, verse 6. Whereas in the main, Sunni Muslims **wash** their feet in the ablution process, Shia Muslims only **wipe** them. The classical debates between different authorities occupy tomes of literature and remain just as prevalent amongst modern scholars.

This article does not intend to provide a comprehensive remit of the debate. Rather, it introduces general arguments to those not familiar with them with a view to inform the reader of its general scope and if required, to assist them to make an informed decision given some of the arguments presented.

Many readers will note that in some English translations of the Quran (5:6), the word feet is usually prefixed by '**wash**' in brackets, though this does not exist directly in the Arabic text as indicated by the brackets. Other translations omit the 'wash' completely as a prefix to the feet, implying a **wipe action**.

The literal Arabic text reads as follows. (Arabic text read from right to left):

ACTION 2

and

and

and

ACTION 1

the ankles till your feet your heads **WIPE** elbows till your hands your faces **WASH**

arjulakum wa-im'sahu fa-igh'silu

Illustration - Joseph Islam

A cursory glance at the text would indicate that the action to wipe governs both the **head and the feet (till the ankles)**, whereas the earlier command to 'wash', governs only the **face and hands (till the elbows)**.

## ARGUMENT FOR WASHING

The main argument for washing the feet is supported by the sunna practice of the largely majority Sunni Muslims and other consensus based arguments (ijma)

However, the action to wash the feet is also argued for **grammatically**. The common reading in the Quran of the Arabic word for '**your feet**' is 'arjulukum' with a 'fatah' over the Arabic letter 'Laam' as highlighted by the red circle below.



## QURANIC

Illustration - Joseph Islam

It is argued by those that vouch for the 'wash' interpretation (predominantly Sunni Muslims), that this is linked to the action 'wash' grammatically **and not** 'wipe'. The argument continues, that if the word 'arjulukum' was present (with a kasra under the Arabic letter 'Laam'), then this would be linked to ACTION 2 which is to 'wipe'. This is shown by the second illustration below with the red circle over the 'kasra'. As 'arjulukum' does not conform to the main reading of the Quran, then the interpretation to wipe, as is argued, cannot be operative, but must infer an interpretation of 'wash'.



## NON-QURANIC

Illustration - Joseph Islam

As the earliest manuscripts of the Quran are **devoid** of any diacritical marks showing vocalisation, the main thrust of the argument is based on **recitation** (which argues arjulAkum) and not evidence based on a particular Quranic codex.

Another common argument to support the 'wash' interpretation is the notion of 'extent'. It is argued that 'wipe' is usually a symbolic expression. When an extent is given, such as 'up to the ankles' (**ilal-ka'bayni**), then there is a strong suggestion that the implication is to wash. (as in - wash your hands **up till the elbows**). Similarly, in the case of 'tayammum' (dry ablution) which is a symbolic expression, we note that the action to 'wipe' has not been qualified by an 'extent' and the hands do not include the wiping up till the elbows, as is the case in normal ablution.

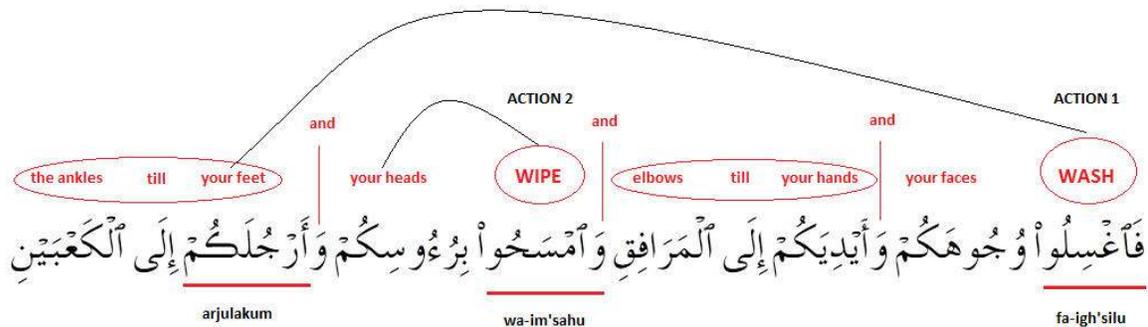


Illustration - Joseph Islam

## ARGUMENTS FOR WIPING

Those that vouch for the 'wipe' interpretation often vehemently contest the above interpretation which they allege is based on a faulty practice and a biased grammatical interpretation.

The counter argument contends for another grammatical device which points to the presence of the conjunction '**and**' (**Arabic: 'wa'**) before the Arabic word 'Arjulakum' (your feet) which renders the connection with the action 'wash' mute. It is therefore argued that the 'feet' are connected with the nearest 'action', the imperative verb 'imsah' (wipe) **and not** 'wash'. With this interpretation, it is argued that Arjulakum must be read with the nearest action (wipe) along with the head (ru'as) and should not be subject to another grammatical device which forces the 'wash' interpretation. This is irrespective of whether the Arabic word is read 'arjulAkum' or 'arjuklkum'

"Some, however, even of those who upheld the view that the feet are to be wiped in the 'wudu', read arjulakum in the accusative and rationalised its inflection from its conjunction with the notional inflection of ru'as. This ta'wil renders the accusative reading similar in effect to the genitive reading. The indication is, this, that the obligation is to wipe, not wash the feet" [1]

Furthermore, it can be argued that other concerns develop with a 'wash' interpretation. To allow for the 'wash' interpretation, one would have to conclude that God intends to prescribe a particular ritual method of order (a) Perform X first, then (b) perform Y next (c) then perform Z. (i.e. breaking the order will invalidate the ablution). Otherwise, an apt question arises as to why the 'feet' were simply not included with the imperative action to 'wash' along with the face and hands up till the elbows?

This would imply that a particular routine in a particular order is more / at least as important, as the general reason for the ablution which the Quran posits as to simply purify one (liyutahirakum).

However, even if one were to accept that the intent of the Quran was to prescribe a systematic ritual order, the contention of not interpreting the feet with the nearest action 'wipe' remains unanswered along with the secondary question - why was a separate command for 'ighsil' (wash) not made in accordance with 31:27 to remove all doubt?

Another contention somewhat lies in the symbolic expression of 'tayammum' (dry ablution). It is noted that what was washed normally in 'ablution' (bar the elbows), now only attracts a 'wipe' command (hands and face) in tayammum. What was wiped in ablution is completely eliminated in tayammum altogether, indicating a systematic relaxation of commands. Here one notes that both the feet and head are eliminated from tayammum (dry ablution). An apt question arises, why are the feet not wiped in tayammum if they were part of the 'wash' action in normal ablution along with the face and hands? Why do the feet escape the symbolic 'wipe'?

It is also argued that in line with the ancient manuscripts which do not vocalise the scripts, the most natural reading would be in the 'genitive' construct, Arjuklukum which could only be interpreted with the 'wipe' action.

Other theological considerations would also arise taking cue from the desert environment where water would usually be expected to remain relatively scarce arguing against the overt consumption of water.

With such a manner of argumentation, the case for 'wiping' the feet is usually strengthened.

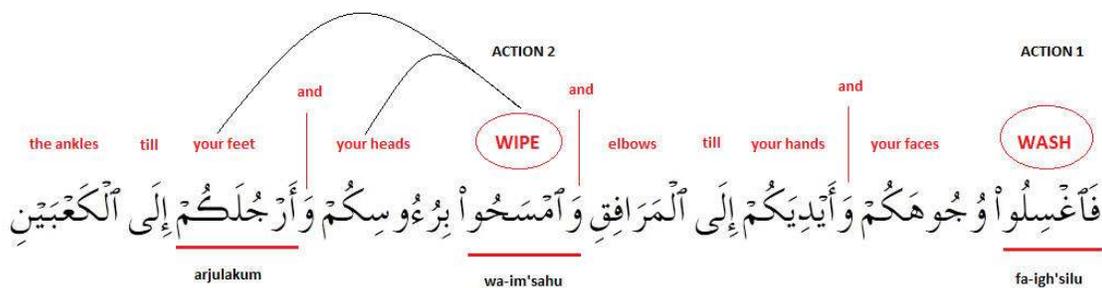


Illustration - Joseph Islam

## ISLAMIC SECONDARY SOURCES

Albeit mute from a Quranic perspective, but as expected, [Islamic secondary sources](#) are replete with both sides of the argument which even spill into modern scholarship.

"Al-Tabarī adduces 47 *hadiths* which seek to clarify the expression *wa-arjulakum ila al-ka`bayn* (and your feet to the ankles) of Quran V:6. The first 27 *hadiths* read the passage as *arjulakum* (accusative); the other 20 *hadiths* read the passage as *arjulikum* (in the genitive). This difference results in reading the passage as either: "when you perform the prayer, wash your faces and your hands to the elbows, and rub your heads, and (wash) your feet to the ankles," or "when you perform the prayer, wash your faces and your hands to the elbows, and rub your heads and (rub) your feet to the ankles." Goldziher would see in these two sharply divided sets of *hadiths* the vestiges of a later debate within the Muslim community about the proper form of *wudū'* (ablution) that has been projected back to the earlier generations of Muslims. Schacht might trace this ablution debate in other texts to determine the relative chronology and the provenance of the *hadiths*. He might also, along with Juynboll, seek a common link to help date the debate. 'Ikrima is a candidate since he appears in five *hadiths*, though the *isnads* form more of a spider pattern. Wansbrough would abandon such use of the *isnad* except to note that their presence implies that the 47 *hadiths* reached their final form after 200 A.H.[9 Century, C.E.] Moreover, the *hadiths* are primarily halakhic and masoretic: they contain pronouncements from the Prophet, his Companions and their Successors and have recourse to variant readings and grammatical explanations. Their presence implies a relatively late date as well. Scholars such as Azami, Abbott, and Sezgin might simply accept that there was some confusion among Muhammad's earliest followers on the precise format of the ablution. The actual positions of the various Companions and Successors on this issue is discernible from the *isnads*. The awkwardness of having *hadiths* that cite Ibn 'Abbas on both sides of the argument can be obviated, in the manner of al-Tabari, by suggesting that the proponents of rubbing the feet to the ankles mean 'rubbing with water" [2]

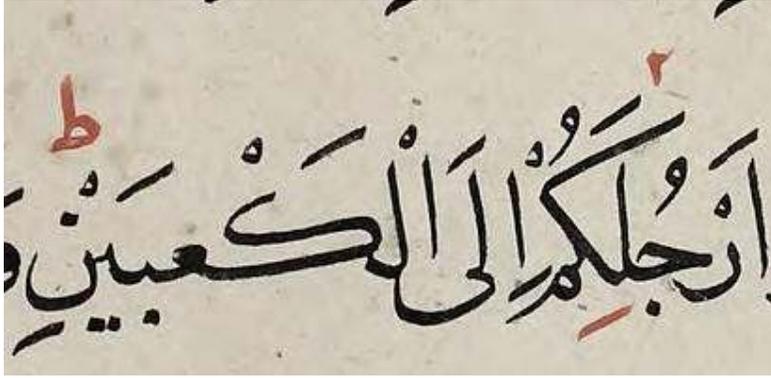
However, as these sources are not contemporaneous with the Quran, these arguably capture a later debate which enraged and was captured by later compilers, but attributed to the earlier authorities.

## MANUSCRIPT EVIDENCE

As mentioned earlier in the article, the ancient manuscripts remain **unvocalised**. Therefore, evidence from the most ancient manuscripts would inevitably prove inconclusive. A later manuscript with the secondary reading, 'Arjullkum' would only attract the charge that it had been tampered with.

For example, the Princeton University Library holds a Quranic manuscript which possibly has Persian provenance from the 15th / 16th century. This seems to support both readings with a 'fatah' (i.e. ArjulAkum) and a 'kasra' (i.e. ArjulIkum) . However, the latter reading with a 'kasra' seems to be a later inclusion and annotated with the number (2). As the script has a Persian provenance, it would

not be unexpected to note a reading which would support a Shia perspective of the ablution command to wipe one's feet and the genitive reading 'Arjul<sup>l</sup>kum'. However, as discussed, many Shia still uphold the major reading 'arjul<sup>a</sup>kum' but still argue for the wipe command based on a particular grammatical device and other theological arguments.



تَعْلَمُونَ هُنَّ مِمَّا عَلَّمَكُمُ اللَّهُ فَكُلُوا مِمَّا آتَاكُمْ مِنْهُ وَذَكَرُوا اسْمَ  
اللَّهِ عَلَيْهِ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ شَدِيدُ الْحِسَابِ الْيَوْمَ جُلُّ لَكُمْ الطِّيبَاتُ  
وَطَعَامُ الدِّينِ وَتَوَاتُرُ الْكِتَابِ جُلُّ لَكُمْ وَطَعَامُكُمْ جُلُّ لَهُمْ وَالْمَحْصَنَاتُ  
مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنَاتِ وَالْمَحْصَنَاتُ مِنَ الَّذِينَ وَتَوَاتُرُ الْكِتَابِ مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ إِذَا  
أَنْتُمْ هُنَّ أَوْ رَهْنٌ مُحْصَنِينَ غَيْرِ مُسَالِحِينَ وَلَا تَتَّخِذِي أَخْدَانٍ وَمَنْ  
يَكْفُرْ بِالْإِيمَانِ فَقَدْ حَبِطَ عَمَلُهُ وَهُوَ فِي الْآخِرَةِ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ يَا أَيُّهَا  
الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا قُمْتُمْ إِلَى الصَّلَاةِ فَاغْسِلُوا وُجُوهَكُمْ وَأَيْدِيَكُمْ إِلَى الْمَرَافِقِ  
وَامْسَحُوا بِرُءُوسِكُمْ وَأَرْجُلَكُمْ إِلَى الْكَعْبَيْنِ وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ جُنُبًا فَاطَّهَّرُوا  
وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ مَرْضَى أَوْ عَلَى سَفَرٍ أَوْ جَاءَ أَحَدٌ مِنْكُمْ مِنَ الْغَائِطِ أَوْ لَامَسْتُمُ  
النِّسَاءَ فَلَمْ تَجِدُوا مَاءً فَتَيَمَّمُوا صَعِيدًا طَيِّبًا فَامْسَحُوا بِوُجُوهِكُمْ وَأَيْدِيكُمْ  
مِنْهُ مَا يَرِي اللَّهُ لِيَجْعَلَ عَلَيْكُمْ مِنْ حَرَجٍ وَلَكِنْ يُرِيدُ لِيُطَهِّرَكُمْ وَلِيُسَمِّعَ  
نِعْمَتَهُ عَلَيْكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ وَاذْكُرُوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ

Source: [3]

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**Physical Description:**

ii, 324, ii leaves: paper ; 484 × 328 (303 × 188) mm.

**Origin:**

[Iran?], between 15--? and 16--?

**CAN THE LESSER READING ARJULIKUM BE SUPPORTED?**

In line with God's protection of the Quran (15:9), one would strongly incline to support the greater 'mutawatir' reading (ArjulAkum), rather than support the lesser common reading based on [Islamic secondary sources](#) and variant readings.

Variant, less common readings (even if it has great support in ancient sources) would clearly stand in conflict with 15:9.

**015:009**

"Surely We have revealed the reminder (Arabic: Dhikr) and We will most surely be its guardian (Arabic: Hafizun)"

**A QUICK WET WIPE**

The Arabic text also lends itself to the interpretation of a quick wet wipe as a residual from the wash of the face and arms. This is supported by the inference of a 'quick wipe' which is inherent in the syntax and can be argued for by the existence of the preposition 'bi' as intimating a rapid action.

**005:006**

"...and wipe your heads (bi-ruusikum)..."



bi

Illustration - Joseph Islam

**025:072**

"...and when they pass by futility (bi-laghwi)..."

وَإِذَا مَرُّوا بِاللَّغْوِ مَرُّوا كِرَامًا

bi

Illustration - Joseph Islam

This is also supported in a PhD thesis by Scholar Dr. S. Al-Azzam who argues for this forcefully which I have captured as an illustration below. He makes a case for two semantic values and supports his second with earlier authorities.

"By contrast, the clause *wa-msahu bi-ru-'usikum wa-arjulakum 'ila l-ka'bayn* not only shows that the believers should wipe their heads with water, but in a way that does not require the excessive use of water. In addition, the preposition *bi* has the following semantic values: first, it indicated the rapid performance of the action, as illustrated in the following piece of the verse (وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَشْهَدُونَ الزُّورَ وَإِذَا مَرُّوا بِاللَّغْوِ مَرُّوا كِرَامًا) سورة الفرقان: 25 آية: 72. which Ali (1946:943) translates as: "Those who witness no falsehood, And if they pass by futility, They pass by it With honourable (avoidance)." Second, it shows that not the whole head is to be wiped or rubbed with water (cf. al-Qurtabi 1933: vols. 13 and 14, 89; al-Zamakkshari 1987: v.3,610)..." [4]

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## FINAL THOUGHTS

Having noted some of the contentions from both perspectives, one should never lose sight of the overall requirement for the command of ablution which remains a precursor to the more important act of prayer. The intention of the verse is most certainly not to become focused with pedantics.

If prayer form and utterance itself remains undefined by the Quran allowing flexibility and to possibly oppose dogged ritualism, one would find it incredulous that ablution would demand such rigidity of interpretation, especially when there is some flexibility in the linguistic expressions of its commandments.

Some classical authorities have even argued that the deliberate ambiguity is to provide a choice.

"Ibn al-Arabi reviews the various position of the ulema, saying, 'The ulema concurred that the feet belong to the bodily parts of *wudu*, but they disagreed about a formal of their *taharah*, whether that is through washing, wiping, or choosing between the two' As we saw, the position of washing is the position of the majority of the classical Sunni scholars; the

position of wiping is the position of many companions and successors, including Ibn Abbas, Anas, and Ikrima; the position of choosing between the two is that of al-Tabari, Hasan al-Basri, Jubbai, Nasir and Dawud. It is appropriate here to emphasize that Ibn al-Arabi is neither part of the Zahiri school of jurisprudence associated with Dawud and Ibn Hazam, nor is he a part of the Shi'ite school.

Ibn al-Arabi says, 'Our position is choice' and goes on to say 'the combination is best'. This last phrase probably refers to al-Nahhas own position which is characterized by al-Nahhas as 'one of the best things said about the issue'. " [5]

In potential grey areas, arguably the better, more inclusive option should be chosen. Here one can argue that this would be 'wash' which would include the wet wiping of the feet anyway. Arguably, a wet wipe would not be so different from a scanty wash. The other option would be to exercise a choice based on sensible judgement.

In the end, believers are only expected to extract the best meaning (39:18) from the Quran and ultimately, endeavour to do their best (64:16).

#### **039:018**

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

#### **064:016**

"So keep your duty to God as **best you can / what you are able (Arabic: ma is'tata'tum)**, and listen, and obey, and spend; that is better for your souls. And whoso is saved from his own greed, such are the successful"

In the end, only God knows best.

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