

Fast 11: Religious principles taught to Israelites — (5): “Small price”

- We continue here with the words of the verse from the last Study:

“But they threw it behind their backs and took a small price for it.” — ch. 3, v. 187

فَنَبَذُوهُ وَرَاءَ ظُهُورِهِمْ وَاشْتَرَوْا بِهِ ثَمَنًا قَلِيلًا

- In Study 9 we quoted Jesus from the Gospels where he condemned the behaviour of the Jewish religious leaders by saying “you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition” and “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions”. This is the same as throwing the book of God behind one’s back. Therefore the statement made in the Quran had been confirmed in the Christian scriptures 600 years earlier.
- The taking of a “small price” for the book of God reminds us of the incident of Jesus and the money changers in the Jewish temple, an incident which is reported in all the four Gospels:
 - “Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them: It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.” (Matthew, 21:12–13. See also Mark, 11:15–17 and Luke, 19:45–46)
 - According to the version in John, Jesus said to the sellers: “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” (John, 2:13–16)

These activities symbolised the replacement of religious observances by trading and the making of money, which might be called selling out religion for material gain. It is a “small price” because religious truths have far greater value than these material gains. (The Quran also says: “What is with Allah is better than entertainment and trading”, ch. 62, v. 11)

- The Quran mentions the wrongs committed by the Israelites after Moses to warn Muslims that they too would commit similar wrongs. The Muslims of later times ignored the Quran and placed Islamic jurisprudence (known as *fiqha*) above it.
- Books of Islamic jurisprudence were compiled by eminent and sincere Muslim scholars between 100 and 200 years after the Holy Prophet’s time. In these books, rulings were given on all aspects of life, religious or worldly, for a Muslim to follow. No doubt, these rulings were based on the Quran and on some of the actions and sayings of the Holy Prophet. But still, they were human judgments prone to error.

Moreover, when new world circumstances arose, in particular with the rise of modern Western civilization in the last three centuries, many of these rulings became inappropriate, inapplicable and even absurd.

- The issues on which the old Islamic *Fiqha* no longer provided useful guidance to Muslims, and was in fact now doing them harm, included the following: relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, the meaning of *jihad*, freedom of religion, and the rights of women.
- Yet people relied on these books for their knowledge of Islam. Allama Dr Sir Muhammad Iqbal has also pointed out this problem. He wrote about *Fiqha*:
 - “But with all their comprehensiveness these systems are after all individual interpretations, and as such cannot claim any finality. I know the Ulema of Islam claim finality for the popular schools of Muhammadan Law ... but since things have changed and the world of Islam is confronted and affected today by new forces set free by the extraordinary development of human thought in all its directions, I see no reason why this attitude should be maintained any longer.” (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 133–134)
 - As an example of the damage done by adherence to the books of Islamic law, Iqbal writes: “In the Punjab, as everybody knows, there have been cases in which Muslim women wishing to get rid of undesirable husbands have been driven to apostasy. Nothing could be more distant from the aims of a missionary religion” (p. 134). What Iqbal is referring to is that, under the Islamic law as enshrined in these books, a woman had no right to claim divorce. So some Muslim women who wanted a justified divorce changed their religion, which meant that their marriage to the Muslim husband could be dissolved.
- The interpretations in these books of law were also influenced by the circumstances and prejudices of those times. Maulana Muhammad Ali writes: “The causes of the early Islamic wars have been greatly misunderstood. These reports were compiled in an age when the rule of Islam had been established, and the mentality of the Muslims had become the same as that of ruling nations who do not consider it wrong at all to treat other nations unjustly.”

This was how *jihad* came to be misrepresented in the Islamic books of law as war to be conducted against non-Muslim nations until they were conquered. They devised the concept that the world is divided rigidly into two zones: the “abode of Islam” (*dar*

al-Islam) and the “abode of war” (*dar al-harb*). Muslims were supposed to be at war against all countries in the second zone, the so-called “abode of war”. There was no justification for such an idea in the Quran or sound books of Hadith. But in modern times this kind of belief would mean that Muslims could not live as citizens of non-Muslim countries, as they would be at war with the country they were living in.