

“Killing one innocent person is like killing all mankind”

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 28 January 2022

مِنْ أَجْلِ ذَلِكَ ۖ كَتَبْنَا عَلَىٰ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ أَنَّهُ مَنْ قَتَلَ نَفْسًا بِغَيْرِ نَفْسٍ أَوْ فَسَادٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَكَأَنَّمَا
قَتَلَ النَّاسَ جَمِيعًا ۖ وَمَنْ أَحْيَاهَا فَكَأَنَّمَا أَحْيَا النَّاسَ جَمِيعًا ۗ وَلَقَدْ جَاءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُنَا بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ ثُمَّ
إِنَّ كَثِيرًا مِّنْهُمْ بَعْدَ ذَلِكَ فِي الْأَرْضِ لَكُسْرٌ فُؤُونٌ ﴿٥٣﴾

“For this reason We prescribed for the Children of Israel that whoever kills a person, unless it is for manslaughter or for mischief in the land, it is as though he had killed all mankind. And whoever saves a life, it is as though he had saved the lives of all mankind. And certainly Our messengers came to them with clear arguments, but even after that many of them commit excesses in the land.” — ch. 5, v. 32.

We often see a part of this verse being quoted, to show the high regard in which Islam holds innocent lives of human beings. The quoted part is: “whoever kills a person... it is as though he had killed all mankind. And whoever saves a life, it is as though he had saved the lives of all mankind.”

Today I will address certain objections that have been raised in connection with this verse. Those who do not want to accept that Islam could have taught Muslims such a grand, humanitarian principle have objected that the Quran is **not** making this principle binding upon Muslims themselves, and all it is saying is that this was a teaching given to the Israelites, **not** that it applies also to Muslims. The first point to note here is that this is not a command, but a principle. With regard to a command which conveys duties and prohibitions, someone could say that the Quran is merely describing a command given to the Israelites which is not incumbent on Muslims. But a principle taught by God to the Israelites applies to Muslims also. For example, God addresses the Israelites in the Quran and says: “Be faithful to your promise to Me and I will be faithful to My promise to you” (2:40). Did this only apply to the Israelites? It

says that God gave the Israelites the following teaching: “If you are grateful, I will give you more, and if you are ungrateful, My punishment is truly severe” (14:7). Isn’t that meant for Muslims also? The Quran tells us God wrote in the Psalms (*Zabur*): “My righteous will inherit the land” (21:105). This is found in the Psalms, 37:29. It would be absurd to suggest that these principles or laws of God don’t apply in case of Muslims.

Even as regards commands that are mentioned in the Quran as having been given to earlier people, usually these apply to Muslims as well. The Quran mentions these commands as given to earlier people, such as the Israelites, to show that God always gave the same commands to people for their spiritual and moral guidance. For example, it is stated in the Quran: “And when We made a covenant with the Children of Israel: You shall serve none but Allah. And do good to (your) parents, and to the near of kin and to orphans and the needy, and speak good (words) to (all) people, and keep up prayer and give the due charity” (2:83). Interestingly, outside Palmers Green Mosque (North London) there is a board that some of us saw recently, on which this verse is quoted, but starting at: “You shall serve none but Allah. And do good to (your) parents...”. All Muslims reading this board consider all the teachings in this verse as applying to them as well. That is why there is nothing wrong with omitting the opening words “And when We made a covenant with the Children of Israel”.

Another objection raised is that, while the Quran says “We prescribed for the Children of Israel that whoever kills a person...”, this statement does not appear in the Torah, i.e., the first part of the Bible, the Old Testament, which is accepted by the Jews as their Divinely-revealed scripture. It is to be found in what we might call a second level Jewish holy book, the Talmud. The Talmud contains the opinions and judgments of the Rabbis. A critic of Islam says in this connection: Muhammad copied the opinion of a Rabbi and wrongly thought it was a revelation from God to the Israelites. I consulted a reputable Jewish website which provides education to Jews and non-Jews on matter relating to their faith (www.aish.com). Someone had asked the question: “Is the Talmud the Word of God?” I quote below from the reply written by a learned Rabbi who lives in Washington D.C.:

“...it is clear that some type of “Talmud” was taught to Moses at Sinai together with the written Torah. This is what we know as the Oral Law. Originally, God instructed Israel to commit the Oral Law to memory, being transmitted by word of mouth from teacher to student over the generations. ... However, the Sages of later generations realized that over time ... the Oral Law was liable to be forgotten, causing a breakdown of tradition. They thus began a process of recording the Oral Torah.”

So that is what the Talmud is. The Rabbi goes on to write: “Thus, fundamentally, we view the Talmud as part of God’s Torah. It was not invented out of thin air but was predicated upon the traditions the Rabbis had been carrying with them orally from Sinai. ... Naturally, unlike the written Torah, the text of the Talmud is not the word for word teachings of Moses. These are teachings in the Rabbis’ own words. But they stem from the traditions the Rabbis received from their teachers, going back in a direct transmission from Sinai.” He ends as follows: “Thus, the wisdom and debates of the Talmud, in all their diverseness and variety, may be accurately seen as correct and eternal Torah truths, as ‘the words of the living God’.”¹

So, the Quran says that a principle was taught by God to the Israelites. That principle is not found in the Torah, as we have it. But it is in the Talmud, and the Talmud is described by these Jewish scholars as containing “correct and eternal Torah truths”.

There are, however, two versions of the Talmud: the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud.² The Babylonian Talmud is regarded as the more complete and more authoritative version. The statement quoted in the Quran occurs in the Babylonian Talmud as follows:

“anyone who destroys one soul from the Jewish people, i.e., kills one Jew, the verse ascribes him blame as if he destroyed an entire world And conversely, anyone who sustains one soul from the Jewish people, the verse ascribes him credit as if he sustained an entire world.” (See under *Sanhedrin*, ch. 4, 37a.13)³

¹ See: <https://www.aish.com/atr/Is-the-Talmud-the-Word-of-God.html>

² See: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/tale-of-two-talmuds/>

³ See: <https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.37a.13?lang=en>

By “verse” here is meant the verse of the Bible in Genesis 4:10. This is the conclusion that the Rabbis writing the Babylonian Talmud drew from a verse of the Bible. You can see that this applies only to the Jewish people. This is rather narrow-minded and biased in favour of their own nation. What the Quran has said is that the Israelites were taught that for any human to kill any other innocent human (not only a Jew) is as if he killed all mankind, and for any human to save any other human (not only a Jew) is as if he saved all mankind. This is a great favour that the Quran has done to the Israelites. It does not say to them: you were taught a narrow-minded belief, which limits your sympathy and fellow-feeling to your own people, but we are making it broad-minded and applying it to all mankind. It says: you were taught respect for all human life, and we accept and reinforce that same teaching.

I mentioned above another Talmud, known as the Jerusalem Talmud, which is considered as less authoritative, less influential and less important than the Babylonian one quoted above. However, it contains that statement which is quoted in the Quran in the same form as it is in the Quran. It reads: “...for anybody who destroys a single life it is counted as if he destroyed an entire world, and for anybody who preserves a single life it is counted as if he preserved an entire world.” (Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin, ch. 4, 9)⁴ Some Jewish scholars of our own times have wondered at the two different versions of this statement in different versions of the Talmud, and have explored the question: “Which version is the original one?” In an article published in 2016 in a Jewish magazine *Mosaic Magazine*, entitled *The Origins of the Precept ‘Whoever saves a life saves the world’*, a Jewish scholar, writing under the name Philologos, asks: “Was the ‘Whoever saves a life’ precept originally a universalistic one stressing the unity of the entire human race, and was it then narrowed by later tradition to include only Jews? Or was it originally a particularistic one referring only to Jews that was subsequently expanded to include all of humanity?”

This 2016 writer, Philologos, refers to the research of an earlier Jewish scholar, Ephraim Urbach, who published an article in 1971, in which he concluded that the

⁴ See: https://www.sefaria.org/Jerusalem_Talmud_Sanhedrin.4.9.1?lang=en

original version was the one which mentions human beings in general: “whoever kills **a person**, it is as if he killed all mankind”, and that it was later on that words were inserted after “a person” to make it “a person among the Israelites”, i.e. a Jew. Philologos writes that the Quran confirms this 1971 finding of Ephraim Urbach, that the “whoever kills a person” wording is the original one. He says: “Much of Sura 5 consists of an attack on Jews and Christians for thinking that they alone possess divine truth and are the sole objects of God’s concern” and he adds that the Quran contradicts this and says: “Allah loves all men, not just the followers of Moses and Jesus, although they were his messengers, too.”

It turns out that, far from the Quran mistakenly attributing this statement to the law revealed to the Israelites, the Quran actually quotes it in the form in which it originally appeared in the teachings given to them.

بَارَكَ اللهُ لَنَا وَتَكْرَمَ فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعَنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالْآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ، إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ
مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-

Note: To this *Khutba*, we have appended the above-mentioned article (*The Origins of the Precept ‘Whoever saves a life saves the world’*). Please see the next page.

THE ORIGINS OF THE PRECEPT "WHOEVER SAVES A LIFE SAVES THE WORLD"

<https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/2016/10/the-origins-of-the-precept-whoever-saves-a-life-saves-the-world/>

And what they tell us about particularism and universalism in Jewish tradition.

October 31, 2016 | Philologos

Got a question for Philologos? Ask him directly at philologos@mosaicmagazine.com.

I don't suppose I was the only Jewish reader to be startled by an October 20 *New York Times* op-ed column about the humanitarian disaster in Syria. Its author was Raed Saleh, director of the Syrian Civil Defense Force: "a group of volunteers," as he describes it, "who rush to the scene of recent bombings to try to save people trapped beneath the rubble." The organization's work, he wrote, "is guided by an Islamic principle, written in the Quran: 'Whoever saves one life, it is written as if he has saved all humanity.'"

An *Islamic* principle? Isn't the precept cited by Saleh, the startled reader asks, a Jewish one, one of the noblest of its kind, found in the Mishnah as well as other talmudic-period texts? How can it be claimed for the Quran, which was written in the 7th century after the entire Talmud was redacted?

And yet Saleh was not making it up. In the 32nd verse of the fifth Sura, or chapter, of the Quran is a retelling of the biblical story of Cain and Abel. In it we read:

For this reason we have ordained for the Children of Israel that whoever kills a person, unless it be for manslaughter or for mischief in the land, it is as though he had killed all men. And whoever saves a life, it is as though he had saved the lives of all



From Cain Leadeth Abel to Death, part of The Old Testament series, c. 1896-1902, by James Tissot. Jewish Museum.

men. And certainly our messengers came to them with clear arguments, but even after that many of them commit excesses in the land.

But this is not plagiarism, either. Although Muhammad and early Islam borrowed a great deal from the rabbinic Judaism of their times without acknowledging it, such is not the case here. On the contrary: the whole thrust of 5:32 is that the precept in question *is* an originally Jewish one that the “Children of Israel” have sinfully failed to live up to. Indeed, the Arabic verb generally rendered by Quranic translations as “we have ordained” or “we have prescribed” is *katabuna*, “we have written.” So whether or not the Quran was aware of where in Jewish tradition the precept came from (Muhammad may have thought it to be biblical), it was understood to belong to the sacred literature of the Jewish people, revealed to them by God’s “messengers” before the advent of Islam.

This presents us with an important and (to the best of my knowledge) hitherto neglected piece of evidence that bears on an intriguing textual problem. The problem lies in determining the original form of the “whoever saves a life” precept, because it exists in two different versions. The best-known place for the first version is the standard edition of the Mishnaic tractate of Sanhedrin, the fourth chapter of which deals with trials and court procedure. There, in a discussion of the need to warn witnesses of the heavy responsibility resting on their shoulders in cases involving possible capital punishment, the Mishnah declares that they should be told:

Therefore, Adam [from whom all humanity descended] was created singly, to teach us that whoever destroys a single life in Israel is considered by Scripture to have destroyed the whole world and whoever saves a single life in Israel is considered by Scripture to have saved the whole world.

The Mishnah was redacted in Palestine in the vicinity of 250 CE. The oldest surviving codices of it, however, date to the Middle Ages, and in some of these we have a different version of our precept in which the words “in Israel” are left out. One of these, for example, written in Parma, Italy in the mid-13th century, reads:

Whoever destroys a single life is considered by Scripture to have destroyed the whole world, and whoever saves a single life is considered by Scripture to have saved the whole world.

Another Italian codex from the province of Cesena, dating to about 1400 and purporting to be an exact copy of the manuscript of the Mishnah belonging to Maimonides (1135-1204), has the same wording. Even earlier, the great exegete Rashi (1040-1105) appears to have possessed such a Mishnah as well, for in his commentary on the precept he writes: “Therefore, man was created singly—this shows you that from a single man the entire world [not “all Israel”] was created.” Rashi’s comment appears to be more in keeping with the Parma and Cesena codices than with the standard text of the Mishnah, which is based on other manuscripts.

Which version of the precept is the original one? That is not a trivial question. It touches on the vexed issue of universalism and particularism in Jewish tradition and of the tension between them. Was the “Whoever saves a life” precept originally a universalistic one stressing the unity of the entire human race, and was it then narrowed by later tradition to include only Jews? Or was it originally a particularistic one referring only to Jews that was subsequently expanded to include all of humanity?

In an article published in 1971 in the Hebrew journal *Tarbitz*, the Israeli scholar of rabbinic thought Ephraim Urbach addressed this question by carefully comparing a large number of ancient and medieval rabbinic texts and manuscripts and their early print editions. His conclusions were clear-cut: the original version of the “Whoever saves a life” precept was the one *without* the limiting phrase of “in Israel,” which was a later interpolation.

At first, Urbach argued, the words “in Israel” were probably inserted because the situation discussed in Sanhedrin applied only to Jews; in Mishnaic times, Jewish courts in Palestine had no jurisdiction over Gentiles. In the course of time, the addition came to be regarded by many copyists and commentators as an intrinsic part of the precept, to which a more particularistic interpretation was then given.

In this respect, the interesting thing about Sura 5 of the Quran is that, although unmentioned by Urbach, it confirms his findings. That is not only because of the wording in verse 32 itself—where the Arabic text speaks of saving the life of any human being—but also because of the context in which it occurs. Much of Sura 5 consists of an attack on Jews and Christians for thinking that they alone possess divine truth and are the sole objects of God’s concern. Verse 18, for instance, states: “And the Jews and Christians say: We are the sons of Allah and his beloved ones. . . . Nay, you are mortals from among those whom he has created. He forgives whom he pleases and chastises whom he pleases.” Allah loves all men, not just the followers of Moses and Jesus, although they were his messengers, too.

Had the original version of the precept in Sanhedrin been “Whoever saves a single life in Israel is considered by Scripture to have saved the whole world,” would not the Quran have played this up as one more proof that the Jews care only about other Jews and believe that God cares only about them, too? The fact that it does not do this establishes, I think, that the version known to it was the “whoever saves a single life” one, without the “in Israel” interpolation. The Jews, Muhammad is saying as part of his claim that Islam is the one truth faith, talk about being responsible for the entire human race but don’t act as if they were. Thanks go to Raed Saleh for bringing this to our attention.

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