

Q & A on verse 4:59

“O you who believe! obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority from among you; then if you quarrel about anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you believe in Allah and the last day; this is better and very good in the end.” (4:59)

Br. Ali Khalfan, has recently replied and commented on numerous questions posed and statements made on the verse 4:59. Some of the questions he has received through the website of *tafseer al-Mizan* that he manages. Br. Ali has lectured on the subject of Tafseer in many places and has extensively studied the *tafseer al-Mizan* of Allamah Tabatabai, a great 20th century Shi’ite exegete. The replies to these questions are mostly based on the *tafseer al-Mizan*.

What is theme or significance of this verse?

Reply: In the Name of Allah the Beneficent and the Most Merciful. The significance of this verse is that it leads to reinforcing the foundation of the Islamic society because the verse contains the most fundamental aspect of religious good, a factor which the equilibrium of the Islamic society could not be maintained. The verse also urges the believers to preserve their unity and to remove any type of discord by referring it to Allah and His Messenger.

Based on the beginning part of the verse, “obey Allah and obey the Messenger” can we deduce that the Messenger’s obedience is the same as Allah’s obedience?

Reply: There is no doubt that the Messenger’s obedience is the same as Allah’s obedience because the Qur’an mentions, *whoever obeys the Messenger has indeed obeyed Allah* and it is Allah who has obliged the people to obey the Messenger as He says: *And We did not send any messenger but that he should be obeyed by Allah’s permission*. However, when Allah tells us to obey Him, it means that we must obey Him in all the realities and laws, which He sent to us through His Messenger. As for His Messenger, his orders spring from his legislative authority based on divine revelation other than the Qur’an and what he, in his wisdom, decides in administrative and judicial matters by the authority given to him by God. What we can infer from this is that the Messenger’s obedience has a connotation distinct from Allah’s obedience and probably this is the reason why it has necessitated repetition of the order of obedience. The repetition is not for emphasis as other exegetes have opined.

What about the obedience of the *ulu’l-amr* in relation to that of the Messenger?

Reply: This is a good question. To answer this question, we first need to explain why the obedience of the *ulu’l-amr* was not repeated like that of the Messenger. In other words, why the verse does not say “and obey the *ulu’l-amr*” but simply joins their obedience with that of the Messenger? This is because unlike the Messenger, those vested with authority, whoever they might be; do not have the legislative authority that the Messenger was given by Allah. The

ulu'l-amr do not have the privilege of revelation; they decide and act according to what is right in their opinion; and their opinion and order must be obeyed just like the prophet's opinion and order.

What kind of authority are the *ulu'l-amr* vested with if it's not the same as that given to the Messenger (sawa)?

Reply: The Qur'an in chapter 33 verse 36 clearly says that the believers have no choice in their affair when Allah and His Messenger have decided a matter. In other words, Allah decides by giving a law and His Messenger decides by elaborating the law, giving an order or pronouncing a judgment. As far as the *ulu'l-amr* are concerned, they have been given the authority to bring to light the decisions of Allah and His Messenger.

Can the Messenger (sawa) issue an order or prohibition on his own?

Reply: Because the obedience ordered by Allah is general without any condition or restriction, it proves that the Messenger cannot issue any order or prohibition contrary to Allah's actual order and prohibition. Otherwise, making his obedience compulsory would be a contradiction in terms.

Based on what has been said, can we then deduce that the Messenger had to be sinless i.e. protected from error and sin?

Reply: Precisely! His state of sinlessness becomes essential because when he issues an order or prohibition, it can never be contrary to Allah's actual order and prohibition.

What is the connotation of the phrase "from among you". Can it indicate that those vested with authority could be normal people like us?

Reply: Actually, the phrase "from among us" qualifies the word "*ulu'l-amr*" i.e. the *ulu'l-amr* will be "raised from among you". It is similar to the words of Allah, "*He it is Who raised among the illiterates a Messenger from among themselves, who recites to them His communications and purifies them, and teaches them the Book and the Wisdom, although they were before certainly in clear error*" (62:2). This leaves no room for any one to say that the phrase "from among you" indicates people like us i.e. mere believers without having distinction of divine protection from errors and sins.

Most of the Muslims from the majority sect are under the impression that the *ulu'l-amr* could be the rightly guided caliphs and therefore they justify the leadership and authority of the first three caliphs.

Comment: If the *ulu'l-amr* are the first three rightly guided caliphs, then their decisions have to be free from mistakes and errors based on the explanation of the verse we have already given. This means that the cause of their perfect decisions have to be something supernatural or

miraculous other than the normal causes. In short, such a cause would be a divinely given miracle. In that case, Allah would have mentioned it as one of the special graces and He should have explained to these caliphs their responsibilities. Likewise, the Prophet should have given detail instructions to his *ummah* regarding these caliphs and the Prophet should have explained about the nature of their authority, etc.

The Shias claim that the Imams of *ahlul-Bayt* are the *ulu'l-amr* and often use this verse as a proof of the '*ismah* (sinlessness) of the Prophet (pbuh) and the Imams. This claim has no legs to stand on.

Comment: We must first bear in mind that the presence of *al-'ismah* (sinlessness) in the Messenger is independently established by proofs from the reason and the Qur'an and the *sunnah*, without depending on this verse. Apparently, it is not the case with the people vested with authority. Someone therefore could imagine that it was not necessary for these people of authority to be ma'sum, sinless, and that the verse could be explained even without believing in their '*ismah*. The reality is that the verse proves the obligation of obeying the *ulu'l-amr*, without putting any restriction or condition. Nor is there any other Qur'anic verse to limit its generality. In short, there is nothing to show that the order "and obey the Messenger and those vested with authority from among you", implies, 'obey those vested with authority from among you as long as they do not order you to commit a sin or until you are not sure that they are in wrong; but if they tell you to commit a sin, you are not obliged to obey them, and if you are sure of their mistake then correct them by directing their attention to the Qur'an and the *sunnah*. Certainly the Qur'an's wording does not support this meaning. Also we should not forget that when ordering people to obey their parents, Allah has attached to it a clear condition "*and if they contend with you that you should associate (others) with Me, of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them...*" (29:8) It should be noted that parents' obedience is much less important than the fundamentals of the religion of Islam. How it is that He did not attach any such condition in the verse of obedience which deals with a fundamental religious principles, and on which depends the felicity of mankind? As the verse shows, the *ulu'l-amr* are just like the Messenger in the obligation of their obedience and this itself is a proof that each of them is similar to the Messenger in two aspects: He too is free from sin and mistake, and his obedience too is obligatory and compulsory. The explanation we have given corresponds with what has been narrated from the Imams of *ahlul-Bayt* that they are the *ulu'l-amr*. We have also shown that the verse proves the sinlessness of the *ulu'l-amr* and none of the groups other than the *ahlul-Bayt* are sinless.

If the *ulu'l-amr* are the sinless Imams of *ahlul-Bayt*, then it was necessary for Allah and His Messenger to identify them.

Comment: The verses of Guardianship, Purity and others clearly talk about such a group of believers and the traditions like that of the Ark (The parable of my *Ahlu l-bayt* is like the parable of Noah's Ark; whoever boarded it was saved, and whoever stayed away from it was drowned);

and that of the Two Precious Things (Surely I am leaving among you two precious [or weighty] things, the Book of Allah and my offspring who are my *Ahlu l-bayt*; as long as you would hold fast to both of them you would never go astray after me.). There are also traditions about the *ulu'l-amr*, narrated through Shia and Sunni chains that clearly identify them to be from the progeny of the Messenger (pbuh).

These days we are unable to reach a sinless Imam and learn knowledge and religion from him; therefore he cannot be an *ulu'l-amr* because there is no way to reach him.

Comment: The problem was created by the *Ummah* itself, not by Allah and His Messenger. The *ummah* opted for ways other than those lay down by the Messenger before his departure from this world and thus the responsibility and obligation to obedience stays unchanged. Suppose a nation kills a prophet sent by Allah. Can the people claim that they are unable to obey him because he is killed? Moreover, there is not a single Muslim community in the world today in which the so called people of influence from among themselves could enforce what they decide for the people.

What if someone claims that those vested with authority are a group of influential persons whose opinion is always correct and free from error?

Reply: If the opinion of the group of influential persons is always correct and free from error, then it should never fail in producing the desired result. Then what else was the cause of all this falsehood, disturbance and mischief, which has overfilled the Muslim world? There were countless gatherings after the Prophet's death, in which influential and powerful leaders of the Muslims collectively decided whatever they thought correct, and followed what in their opinion was the right path; but all this led them to nowhere; they went on blundering into far-reaching errors; their attempts to bring happiness to the Muslims increased only the *ummah's* misfortune and unhappiness. The society, which was based on religion, turned soon after the Prophet (s.a.w.a.) into imperialism - oppressive and destructive. Let scholars make in-depth study of the disturbances and mischief that raised their head, since the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.a.) departed from this world; and have a look at what followed. On every page of Islamic history they will find blood spilled, honors defiled, properties looted, religious laws ignored and divinely ordained punishments nullified. Let them look for its origin and discover its roots. Was there any effective cause other than the opinions formed and decisions taken by the powerful and influential leaders, which they had yoked the *ummah* with?

The obligation of obeying the *ulu'l-amr* whoever they might be does not prove that they have any distinction or superiority over others.

Comment: If the *ulu'l-amr* do not have any distinction as per the view of this writer then it would mean that they could be unjust or oppressive leaders and that we have been obligated to obey such leaders by Allah. But the Qur'an contains numerous verses forbidding obedience to the unjust, the oppressors and unbelievers. Further, if the *ulu'l-amr* were ordinary people

having no distinction, let alone the possibility that some of them were unjust, how can one justify joining their obedience with that of Allah's and His Messenger?

The order given in this verse is like any other religious commands which can be implemented only when its object is available. For example, it is obligatory to spend on the poor but it is not obligatory to create a poor in order that we could spend on him.

Comment: To reiterate, the verse contains the most fundamental aspect of religious good, a factor which the equilibrium of the Islamic society could not be maintained. Even the famous Sunni exegete, Sayyid Maududi writes:

“This verse is the cornerstone of the entire religious, social and political structure of Islam, and the very first clause of the constitution of an Islamic state. It lays down ... principles as permanent guidelines”

Just like the society needs a Messenger for guarding and managing the affairs of the people, it needs a guide – a leader at all times for the same reason. Allah says: *And those who disbelieve say: Why has not a sign been sent down upon him from his Lord? You are only a warner and (there is) a guide for every people.* (13:7)

Therefore, it is impossible for Allah to order or to oblige us to obey someone who did not exist or is rarely found.

What is Sayyid Maududi's, the famous 20th century Sunni exegete view on this verse?

Reply: Sayyid Maududi is the author of “Understanding the meanings of the Qur'an” and is regarded by many in the Sunni world as a great exegete. His commentary on this verse is quite comprehensive. For the sake of brevity I will just touch on what he says about the *ulu'l-amr*. To paraphrase, Maududi says that those vested with authority (*ulu'l-amr*) are those who are entrusted in matters of common concern and he includes intellectuals as well as political leaders, judges, officials, etc. He goes on to say that their obedience however is contingent on conditions that these men should be believers and that they themselves should be obedient to Allah and His Messenger. First of all, the conditions that Maududi mentions are obvious because the verse addresses the believers and therefore the clause “the *ulu'l-amr*” from among you” implies that they have to be believers who are already obedient to Allah and His Messenger. In my opinion, where Maududi has gone wrong is when he refers to these obvious conditions as the basis of making their obedience conditional. Secondly, we can see clearly from the verse that Allah has not attached any conditions in making their obedience obligatory upon us. In short, we have been commanded and obliged by Allah to obey them unconditionally because of their state of being pure or rather sinless.

If the term *ulu'l-amr* refers to leaders in the community and the likes of political leaders, judges, etc, obviously there will be situations when such leaders will fail to offer specific

instructions or opinions to safeguard the interests of the people who follow them unless they have been endowed with knowledge and wisdom.

Comment: This is precisely the point we are trying to make. Maududi calls such a situation as “the silence of the law”. He explains that the silence of the law indicates that God has deliberately granted man the freedom to make his own decisions and therefore, when no specific guidance is available, a Muslim should feel free to exercise his own discretion. This is totally unacceptable because first it clearly contradicts the wordings of the verse and second, the unconditional order to obey the *ulu’l-amr* is a proof in itself that guidance is available in all affairs of the believers at all times and in every community as long as the believers refer to such authority. Further, Maududi’s mention about the ‘silence of the law’ is a contradiction of his own statements at the beginning of his commentary of this verse which we mentioned in the previous question. If the verse is the cornerstone of the entire religious, social and political structure of Islam, and the very first clause of the constitution of an Islamic state, as Maududi states, how can he entertain a situation like the “silence of the law”?

What is Ibn Kathir’s view on this verse?

Reply: Ibn Kathir, is a famous 13th century Sunni exegete and his exegesis of the Qur’an in general relies too much on extraneous sources – mainly the traditions. His explanation of this verse with the help of traditions – according to my conclusions, does not conform to the nature of the obedience commanded by Allah. Even the circumstance of the revelation of this verse which he quotes is completely out of context. Regarding the *ulu’l-amr*, he says that their obedience is in reality the obedience to Allah only in that which they command you which is not in disobedience to Allah. This may sound a little complicated to understand but nevertheless it is like attaching conditions to the verse and we have shown before that the verse is unconditional. There is not much difference in what Ibn Kathir says and other Sunni writers and commentators about this verse.

What does ar-Razi, the author of *tafseer al-Kabir* say about this verse?

Reply: I have not read or studied the full commentary by ar-Razi but just a passing reference in *tafseer al-Mizan* regarding the usage of the plural pronoun “*ulu’l-amr*”. *Ulu’l-amr*, being a plural noun, shows that there must be a number of those vested with authority, and it is correct without any doubt, but obviously it is possible for them to come one after another, and the believers would be required to obey the one who manages their affairs at a given time. The author of *tafseer al-Kabir*, ar-Razi has objected to this idea, saying "it would mean using a plural for singular and that is contrary to a word's apparent usage." It seems he had forgotten that such usage is very common in literature, and the Qur'an itself is full of such verses. For example, *So do not yield to the rejecters* (68:8); *So do not follow the unbelievers* (25:52); *surely we obeyed our leaders and our great men* (33:67); *and do not obey the bidding of the extravagant ones* (26:151); *Maintain the prayers* (2:238); *and make yourself gentle to the*

believers (15:88) and various other verses containing positive and negative statements, and having declarative as well as exclamatory sense.

If the *ulu'l-amr* have a special distinction such that their obedience is the same as that of the Messenger, then why are they not mentioned in the next sentence when Allah orders the believers to refer their disputes to Allah and the Messenger?

Reply: This is one of the objections against the belief that the *ulu'l-amr* are the sinless Imams. To reiterate, those vested with authority, do not have the privilege of revelation; they decide and act according to what is right in their opinion; and their opinion and order must be obeyed just like the prophet's opinion. This shows that the people with authority have no right to legislate a new law or to abrogate a rule established by the Qur'an or the *sunnah*. Otherwise, it would serve no purpose to order people to refer their dispute to the Qur'an and the *sunnah*, to Allah and the Messenger, as may be inferred from the verse 33:36: *And it is not for a believing man or a believing woman to have any choice in their affair when Allah and His Messenger have decided a matter; and whoever disobeys Allah and His Messenger, he surely strays off a manifest straying.* This is the reason why they are not mentioned in the next sentence.

Other than having disputes about the legislative matters of the religion, can we suppose that the dispute is also between the believers and the *ulu'l-amr* in matters of orders issued by the latter?

Reply: No, we cannot suppose that the dispute is between the believers and the *ulu'l-amr* because the believers are obligated to obey them otherwise the said obligation or the unconditional command becomes meaningless. So the dispute or quarrel must be an internal dispute among the believers and it cannot be in matters of orders issued by those vested with authority; rather it has to be about identification of Allah's command in a particular affair.

Allah says "if you have a dispute about any thing" in the verse. What does "thing" encompass?

Reply: The word "thing" is general and could possibly include all decisions and orders given by Allah, His Messenger and the *ulu'l-amr*; yet the next words, "refer to Allah and the Messenger" show that the dispute is about something outside the direct responsibility of the *ulu'l-amr*. They have full authority and control over matters which come within the area of their wilayah (guardianship; mastership), like their order to join an expedition, to fight or to make peace, etc.

If the word "thing" possibly includes orders issued by the *ulu'l-amr* don't you think they should have been mentioned in the sentence "refer to Allah and the Messenger" even though there are some things which are outside their jurisdiction?

Reply: This is a very good question. The reason why they are not mentioned in the second sentence is because people are already obliged to obey the *ulu'l-amr* in orders within their

direct responsibility. This adds further clarification that the dispute is in religious laws issued by Allah through His Messenger.

What does the proviso “if you believe in Allah and the last day” indicate or mean?

Reply: This clause puts utmost emphasis to the order of referring the disputes to Allah and His Messenger and indicates that its contravention emanates from defect in belief. Therefore the order has direct connection with faith. Someone whose disbelief is hidden in his heart can pretend to believe in Allah and the Messenger and will easily contravene this order. Thus his disbelief and hypocrisy comes into manifestation.

What conclusions can we draw from this verse?

As we have mentioned before, the verse promises equilibrium in the Muslim *ummah* on the condition that the people obey Allah, His Messenger and those vested with authority. For anyone to say that those vested with authority are groups of people other than the sinless Imams of *ahlul-Bayt*, it is like shooting in the dark because not only the verse proves their *'ismah* but besides the Imams, there is not a single group of people who are sinless. The Qur'an and traditions prove their purity without a shade of doubt and if people were to follow these and other Qur'anic injunctions, there would be no injustice and oppression in the world. The origin and roots of all the discord in the Muslim *ummah* is disobedience to Allah, His Messenger and the *ulu'l-amr*.

END