

05. The teaching of the Qur'an on Non-Muslim governors,
Women, Paradise and Hell (pages 25-30).



Jacob's Dream Gustave Doré

1. Texts that are sometimes interpreted as forbidding Muslims to obey a government other than a Muslim one.

Sûrah 3:28 *'Let not the believers take the disbelievers as protectors (Arabic awliya', from Medina)'. The Study Quran* states: 'Awliya' (singular wali) is a multifaceted word that can mean 'protector', 'ruler' 'ally', 'client' or 'friend' depending on the context' (page 138 column 2).

Sûrah 4:89 reads: *'Do not take disbelievers as protectors (awliya') till they migrate in the way of God. But if they turn their backs, then seize them and slay them wherever you find them.'* (from Medina)

Sûrah 5:51, 55 reads: *'O you who believe! Take not the Jews and Christians as protectors (awliya'). They are the protectors of one another. And whosoever takes them as protectors, surely he is of them ... Your protector is only God and His Messenger, and those who believe, who perform the prayer and give alms while bowing down'* (from Medina).

The problem is not that many Muslims living in a democracy interpret the sûrahs as forbidding them to live under a non-Muslim law. The problem is that Muslim teachers, if they so choose, can interpret and teach the sûrahs in this way. Such an interpretation obviously poses problems in a democratic society.

2. Texts that speak of the relationship between men and women.

Sûrah 2:222-243 looks at some aspects of the relationship between husbands and wives. It includes the statement: “*Men have a degree over women*” (2:228, from Medina). This view was prevalent in seventh century tribal Arabia, as in other places then and since. But are we to believe that this is God’s specific and literal instruction? Along the same line, the Quran’s instructions in Sûrah 4 concerning heritage favour the male: ‘*unto the male a share equal to that of two females*’ (Sûrah 4:II).

In Sûrah 4:34 we read: *‘Men are the upholders and maintainers of women, by virtue of that in which God has favoured some of them above others.’* It gets stronger: *“As for those women from whom you fear discord and animosity, admonish them, then leave them in their beds, then strike them”* (from Medina).

Such statements are perhaps understandable when we look at the prevailing culture in seventh century Arabia (and in other cultures then and since). It is another matter to read them as expressions of God’s will.

Sûrah 33 (from Medina) concerns Muhammad's wives: *"O Prophet! We have made lawful for thee thy wives to whom thou hast given their bridewealth, as well as those whom thy right hand possesses of those whom God has granted thee as spoils of war* [two of Muhammad's wives fit into this group: Safiyyah bint Huyayy and Juwaayriyah bint Harithah], *and the daughters of thy paternal uncles and the daughters of thy paternal aunts, and the daughters of thy maternal uncles and the daughters of thy maternal aunts who emigrated with thee, and any believing woman if she gives herself in marriage to the Prophet and if the Prophet desires to marry her – for thee alone, not for the rest of the believers. We know well what We have enjoined upon them with respect to their wives and those whom their right hands possess, that there may be no blame upon thee. And God is Forgiving, Merciful"* (Sûrah 33:50).

Muhammad is given permission to have as many wives as he wants. Are we to take this as a literal instruction from God, or should we understand it as Muhammad's idea?

It is difficult not to have the same doubts about Sûrah 66 (from Medina): *‘O Prophet! Why dost thou forbid that which God has made lawful unto thee, seeking the good pleasure of thy wives? And God is Forgiving, Merciful. God has already ordained for you the absolution of your oaths, and God is your Master. He is the Knower, the Wise’* (Sûrah 66:1-2). *The Study Quran* writes: ‘This verse was reportedly revealed after the Prophet had sworn to his wife Hafsa that he would no longer have intimate relations with his Coptic slave girl, Mariyah. The Prophet had been intimate with Mariyah in Hafsa’s apartment on Hafsa’s day (the Prophet’s wives rotated, each having a day with him in turn). When Hafsa became upset, the Prophet asked her to tell no one of it, and promised on oath that he would not again be intimate with Mariyah. He then told Mariyah that she was forbidden to him, after which this verse and the following verses were revealed’ (page 1389 column 1).

God assures Muhammad that he does not have to keep the oath he swore to his wife, since God has declared that it is lawful for him to be intimate with Mariyah! Is this God speaking?

Tragically, seeing women as subordinate to men is found in almost all cultures. In spite of the teaching and example of Jesus, throughout history Christians, like other religious communities, have been slow to recognise the complementary equality between men and women. We have even managed to construe parts of our sacred writings to support the subjection of women.

Paul grasped Jesus' teaching well when he wrote in what is perhaps his earliest extant letter: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28).

However, Paul was necessarily a man of his time and when he speaks, for example, of marriage, he speaks of marriage as it was experienced in the culture of his day. Paul writes: **‘Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord’** (Ephesians 5:22). He is not telling wives to be subject to their husbands – he, along with his readers, is taking that for granted. What he is doing is introducing an element that radically shifts the focus of the relationship between a wife and her husband: she is to be subject to her husband ‘as you are to the Lord.’ As he wrote in the verse just before the one I have quoted: **‘Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ’** (Ephesians 5:21) – man to woman and woman to man.

When relationships of any kind are lived ‘in Christ’ everything changes. Sadly, even in cultures influenced by Christianity, the relationships between men and women have been slow to change. It appears that even love finds it hard to change cultural habits.

3. Paradise

When the Qur'an speaks of heaven it is not speaking of communion with God, as we Christians do. It is speaking of *'Gardens of bliss in the presence of their Lord'* (Sûrah 68:34, from Mecca).

Furthermore, in its descriptions of Paradise the Qur'an always speaks from the male point of view. The joys of heaven include *'maidens of modest gaze, of like age'* (Sûrah 38:52).

‘Truly, the reverend are in a station secure amid gardens and springs, wearing fine silk and rich brocade, facing one another. Thus it is. And we shall wed them to wide-eyed [others translate ‘black-eyed’] *maidens’* (Sûrah 44:52-54).

‘Truly, the reverent shall be in gardens of bliss, rejoicing in what their Lord has given them. And their Lord has shielded them from the punishment of Hellfire: “Eat and drink in enjoyment for that which you used to do,” reclining upon couches arrayed, and we shall wed them to wide-eyed maidens’ (Sûrah 52:18-20).

‘They recline upon beds lined with rich brocade, the fruits of the two Gardens near at hand. So which of your Lord’s boons do you two deny?’ [This is a refrain in this surah. It is addressed to both human beings and jinns]. *Therein are maidens of modest gaze, whom neither man nor jinn has ever touched*’ (Sûrah 55:54-56), *‘good and beautiful ones’* (55:70), *‘maidens secluded in pavilions’* (55:72), *‘untouched as yet by man or jinn’* (55:74). *‘They recline upon green cushions and beautiful wonders’* (55:76).

‘There shall be wide-eyed maidens’ (Sûrah 56:22).

‘Truly, the reverent shall have a place of triumph, gardens and vineyards, buxom maidens of like age’ (Sûrah 78:33).

It is one thing to read these statements from within the patriarchal culture of seventh century Arabia. It is another to read them as divine revelation.

4. Hell

The Qur'an frequently refers to God's ultimate judgment. Sûrah One speaks of God as '*Master of the Day of Judgment*'. The consistent teaching of the Qur'an is that the believers (those who submit to the revelations given by God through Muhammad) are destined for heaven, the disbelievers, that is all Jews, Christians and other non-Muslims, and those who claim to be Muslims but are hypocrites, are destined for hell.

'As for those who disbelieve, garments of fire shall be cut for them, and boiling liquid shall be poured over their heads, by which their innards and their skin will be melted' (Sûrah 22:19-20, from Medina).

Muhammad is very conscious of his role as one who warns. He objects to those who see him only as one who warns (Sûrah 11:12), but it remains true that warning features frequently in the sûrahs. The Qur'an defines his mission as '*a warner and a bearer of good tidings*' (sûrahs 6:48; 7:188; 11:2; 17:105; 46:1). In this he sees himself as carrying on the mission of earlier prophets whose mission is described in the same terms (sûrahs 4:165; 6:48; 18:56). *The Study Quran* states in the commentary on Sûrah 50, verse 28: "Some read threat here as a reference to the Quran, since to warn people of the impending punishment is considered a function of all revelation and is a central theme of the Quran' (page 1269, column 1).

Hell features frequently in the Qur'an. 'Hell' or its equivalent ('*Flame*', '*Fire*') is explicitly mentioned in 83 of the 114 sûrahs. This leaves 31 sûrahs that do not mention 'hell' explicitly, but in nearly half of these we find expressions such as: '*an overwhelming punishment from God*' (Sûrah 12:107); '*the punishment of a tremendous day*' (Sûrah 26:135); '*arraigned unto the punishment*' (Sûrah 30:16); '*the Lord crushed them for their sin*' (Sûrah 91:14); '*God's wrath*' (Sûrah 60:13); '*painful punishment*' (Sûrahs 61:10 and 76:31); '*God will never forgive them*' (Sûrah 63:6); '*terrible punishment*' (65:8); '*the punishment of the Hereafter*' (68:33); '*a spine-crushing calamity will befall them*' (Sûrah 75:25); '*overspread with darkness*' (Sûrah 80:41).

'Warning' and 'Hell' have a huge role in the Qur'an.

Hell is the fate of 'disbelievers': those who do not submit to the revelations that God gives to Muhammad, and do not accept Muhammad as God's Messenger. Sûrah 3:10 (from Medina) is one of many texts that state that disbelievers 'shall be fuel for the Fire'.

Religious groups of all kinds over the centuries have sometimes behaved as though only those who belong to their religion will be saved. If we reflect on the cultural situation in Arabia in the seventh century, such a statement is perhaps understandable, but as a statement from God? It is true that some people who claim to be Christians have spoken in similar ways. The difference is that Christians cannot claim Jesus to support their view

Christians are at one with the Qur'an when it states: '*God guides to Himself whoever turns in repentance*' (Sûrah 13:17, from ?), because '*God does not wrong human beings in the least, but rather human beings wrong themselves*' (Sûrah 10:44, from Mecca).

However, Muhammad understood that the only way for people to avoid this fate was to surrender to God's will by accepting the revelation given them through Moses, through Jesus, and, finally, through the revelations given through Muhammad.

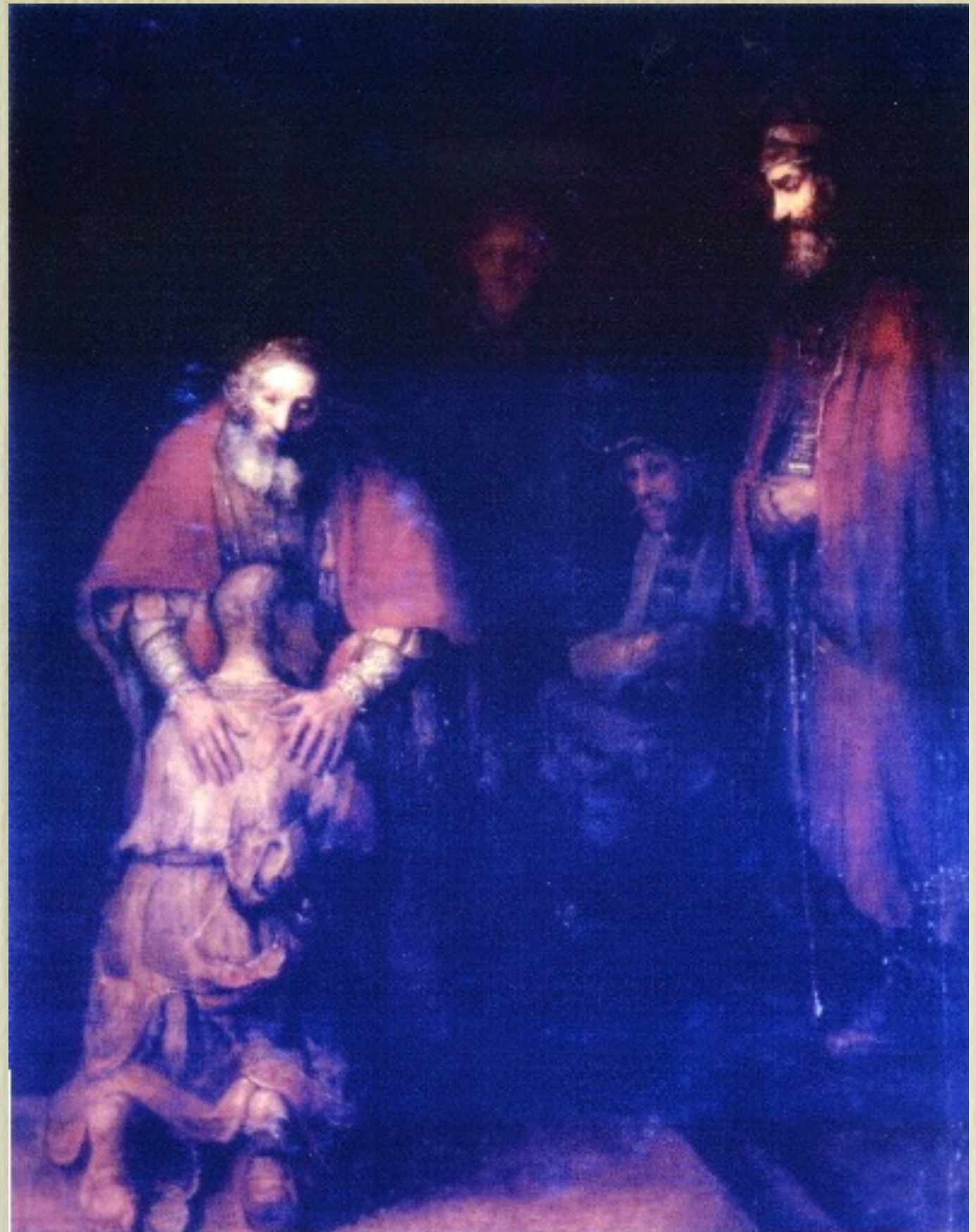
By contrast, 'hell' is mentioned only once in the Gospel of Mark (see Mark 9:43-47); four times in the Gospel of Matthew (see Matthew 5:22-30; 10:28; 18:9 and 23:15,33); once in Luke (see Luke 12:5); once in the Letter of James (see James 3:6), and once in the Second Letter of Peter (see 2 Peter 2:4).

Jesus does insist on the importance of the decisions we make. We will be judged by how we live, and to obstinately refuse God's invitation to love is to choose to exist cut off from God. Such an existence is 'hell'.

The Christian view is expressed by the Catholic Catechism (1994):
'To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from God for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called "hell"'(n. 1033).

Christians believe that God grants freedom to everyone and completely respects it. God never stops reaching out to all to attract us to enjoy divine communion. Jesus' prophetic message does include a warning. He alerts us to the importance, the eternal importance, of embracing the love God offers us. He sees the mission given him by God as a mission to reveal God as love, and to love us sinners in the hope that we would get in touch with our deepest yearning and discover who we truly are, and yield to the divine love that is always drawing us into communion. Jesus wanted everyone to share in the intimate communion with God in love that he himself knew.

This constant and compassionate love is beautifully expressed in the story Jesus told of the father (God) who respects the choices his two sons make, but is always ready to reach out to them and welcome them home (see Luke 15:11-32).





The Lord delights
in mercy.

Words and Music: Brian Boniwell
sung by Paul Gurr *The Lord Delights*.

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The Lord delights
in the lowly
who come to seek
His love.

Attracting with
His fragrance,
He gives the soul
His joy.

May You ever draw us.

May our hearts
be wounded,
burning with desire
for You.

Light the fire of love.



The Lord delights
in Mary. In her
He finds His rest.
While walking
in His garden
her beauty wins
His heart.

Look upon
Your mother.
In our souls
that love You,
see not what we are
my Lord,
but see Your
mother's face.