

Note on the so-called “wife-beating” verse 4:34 of the Holy Quran

Compiled by Dr Zahid Aziz

“And (as to) those on whose part you fear desertion, admonish them, and leave them alone in the beds and *idribū-hunna*.” — 4:34

In this verse, husbands are addressed about their wives, and the closing words, *idribū-hunna*, are generally translated as “beat them”. The Arabic root in *idribū* is *ḍarb*. It signifies a wide variety of actions and is used in the Quran with several different meanings. In the classical Arabic lexicons *Tāj al-‘Arūs* and *Lisān al-‘Arab* it is stated under the root *ḍ-r-b*:

وَالضَّرْبُ يَقَعُ عَلَى جَمِيعِ الْأَعْمَالِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا

“*ḍarb* signifies all kinds of actions except a few”.

Examples of such actions other than “beating”, for which *ḍarb* is used in the Quran, are as follows:

1. Setting forth a parable or likeness. There are numerous verses stating that Allah sets forth parables (16:75, 16:76, 39:29, 66:10, 13:17, 14:25 etc.). The act of *ḍarb* is also attributed to the disbelievers when they put forward other things as being likenesses or similitudes of Allah (16:74, 36:78) or a bewitched man as a likeness of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (17:48, 25:9).

In one place Jesus is twice described as the object of the action of *ḍarb*, but of course he is not being “beaten” but being put forward as an example. First it is stated: “And when the son of Mary is mentioned (*ḍariba*) as an example” (43:57). In the next verse the disbelievers are said to apply *ḍarb* to him (*ḍarabū-hu*), not of course “beat him” but to cite his case in argument (43:58).

Another verse refers to the custom of the pre-Islamic Arabs to ascribe daughters to Allah, yet they disliked to have daughters themselves. Daughters are mentioned there in these words: “that which he sets up (*ḍaraba*) for the Beneficent as a likeness” (43:17). The act of *ḍaraba* is performed by them on their daughters, not of course by beating them, but by presenting them as a likeness for what they think Allah has, i.e., that He has daughters.

2. Going about (in the land), as in “they cannot go about in the land” (2:273), “when they travel in the land” (3:156), and “when you go forth” (4:94, 4:101). See also 5:106 and 73:20.
3. Drawing a cloth over yourself, as in “and let them (women) draw their head-covering over their bosoms” (24:31). Here the Arabic for “and let them draw” is *wa-l-yaḍribna*.
4. A wall being raised: “A wall will be raised (*ḍuriba*) between them” (57:13).
5. A state overcoming over you: “Abasement shall come upon (*ḍuriba*) them ... humiliation will be made to cling (*ḍuriba*) to them” (3:112). See also 2:61.
6. Sealing or covering: “So We sealed (*ḍarab-nā*) their ears in the cave for a number of years” (18:11). It is stated here that Allah carried out the act of *ḍarb* upon their ears. Most translators of the Quran into English translate it as “sealing their” or putting a veil or covering on their ears. According to Arabic lexicons, this can also be rendered as: “We prevented them from hearing” — مَنَعْنَاهُمْ أَنْ يَسْمَعُوا (see Lane’s Lexicon, *Qāmūs*, and *Tāj al-‘Arūs*).

These examples show that the action described as *ḍarb* often does not mean striking, hitting, or beating, but has a variety of other meanings.

***Ḍarb* by a person upon another person**

A question has been raised that, when the act of *ḍarb* is described as being done *by a human being to another human being*, it can only mean “beat”. We have already given two cases above where human beings do the act of *ḍarb* to other humans but it means that they put those other humans forward as examples. In 43:57–58 Jesus is the one to whom the act of *ḍarb* is done by people and in 43:17 the pre-Islamic Arabs are doing the act of *ḍarb* to their daughters.

More generally, it is stated in Lane’s Lexicon that when God or some person puts forward (*ḍarb*) something as an example (*mathl-an*), then there are two objects of this action: (1) the thing which is being put forward, and (2) the word “example” itself. He gives the following instance from the Quran:

“And (O Prophet) set out to them a parable of the people of the town” (36:13).

The Holy Prophet is here told to apply the act of *ḍarb* to the parable **and** to the people of the town. (See Lane, vol. 2, p. 1779, bottom of col. 2 to top of col. 3.)

A word having the same root as *ḍarb* is *ḍarīb*, which means one to whom the act of *ḍarb* has been done. When *ḍarb* means “to beat”, *ḍarīb* is the one who has been beaten. According to the classical lexicon *Tāj al-‘Arūs*:

وَيُقَالُ: فُلَانٌ ضَرِيبٌ فُلَانٍ أَيْ نَظِيرُهُ. وَضَرِيبُ الشَّيْءِ: مِثْلُهُ وَشَكْلُهُ

“It is said: So-and-so is the *ḍarīb* of so-and-so, meaning he is like him. And the *ḍarīb* of a thing is something which is like it and of the same form.”

The above statement is also mentioned in Lane’s Lexicon, on p. 1781, col. 2.

In *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* by Hans Wehr, edited by J. Milton Cowan, it is stated under the main entry *ḍ-r-b*:

“ضرب *ḍarīb*: beaten, struck, smitten, hit; similar, like.

ضرب الشيخ فلان *ḍarīb al-Shaikh fulān*: one of the calibre of Sheikh So-and-So.”

In other words, if person A is very much like person B, then A can be called as the *ḍarīb* of B, as if he has been beaten into the shape of B. Let us take the case where person B was a teacher or preceptor and person A was his student or follower. In this example, the act of *ḍarb* has been performed by person B upon person A.

The various examples we have given above settle the point that even in cases in which a human being is described as having had *ḍarb* done to him by another person it need not necessarily mean beating.

A suggestion as to meaning of *ḍarb* in 4:34

Another verse in which *ḍarb* is used may help to show what it could mean in 4:34, other than applying corporal punishment to the wife. It is used there as meaning *to turn (something) away*:

“Shall We then *turn away the Reminder* from you altogether because you are a prodigal people?”. (43:5)

Here “the Reminder” is the object of the verb *ḍarb* (i.e., the thing which is being beaten), but by striking it from you is meant *turning it away, taking it away, withdrawing it, and withholding it* from you. These are the various translations of these words given by almost all translators of the Quran.

Applying this to 4:34, the meaning would be that the husbands should *turn them away*. That turning away of the wives may be in one of two senses: either turn your wives away *from wrongdoing* by means of the first two measures mentioned in the verse, or turn your wives away *from yourselves*, i.e., divorce them if the first two measures of admonishing and breaking off sexual relations fail to work.

It may be added that the Quran clearly forbids the husband from causing injury to his wife. In its rules for divorce, husbands are told about their wives:

“... then retain them with kindness or let them go with kindness and do not retain them for injury” (2:231),

“... retain them with kindness or part from them with kindness” (65:2)

“... do not injure them in order to impose hardship upon them” (65: 6).

In fact, only a few verses prior to 4:34, husbands have been instructed as follows about their wives:

“Nor should you cause them hardship... And treat them kindly. Then if you hate them, it may be that you dislike a thing while Allah has placed abundant good in it.” (4:19)

Hadith reports

In Hadith, we find two reports in Abu Dawud that the Holy Prophet Muhammad, upon being asked as to how a husband should treat his wife, what to do and what not to do, replied that you should provide her with food and clothing to the same standard as yourself and “do not disgrace her face, nor beat her”. The words for “nor beat her” are *wa lā taḍrib*, using the same word as in the Quran 4:34, from *ḍarb*.

The next report is similar, the closing words of the Holy Prophet here being: “and do not beat them, nor disgrace them”. The words for “do not beat them” are *wa lā taḍribū-hunna* (Abu Dawud, Book of Marriage, hadith 2143 and 2144).

In hadith 2146 here, the following is reported:

The Messenger of Allah said: “Do not beat (*lā taḍribū*) the hand-maidens of Allah (this term means women).” So Umar came to the Messenger of Allah and said: “Women have become rebellious against their husbands”. So the Messenger of Allah permitted them to beat them. Many women then visited the wives of the Messenger of Allah complaining about their husbands (i.e., beating them). The Prophet said: “Many women have come to the wives of Muhammad complaining about their husbands. These men are not the best among you.”

This last report is also in Ibn Majah, hadith 1985. That version additionally has these words:

Umar said: “Women have become rebellious against their husbands. So order the beating of them.” So they were beaten.

It is also relevant to note that the hadith before this in Ibn Majah, hadith 1984, is as follows:

“Aishah said: The Messenger of Allah never beat (*ḍarb*) any of his servants or wives, and never hit anything with his hand.”

This hadith is also in Sahih Muslim, where it is added:

“...except when he was fighting in the way of Allah” (Book of Virtues, hadith 2328a).

It is evident from these reports that the Holy Prophet forbade husbands to beat their wives, and only on Umar’s insistence did he allow it. Even then he disapproved of those husbands who availed of this permission.

According to the reports mentioned above, the Holy Prophet said: *lā taḍribū-hunna* (or the singular case, *lā taḍrib*), while the Quran in 4:34 says the opposite:

idribū-hunna. It is a fundamental principle that the Holy Prophet could not say or do the opposite of what is in the Quran. We must reconcile his statement with the Quran, and if that is not possible then reject his statement as not being from him or not correctly reported. These can be reconciled if what the Holy Prophet was negating was not the words of the Quran but people’s misunderstanding of those words. Men may have taken the words of the Quran, *idribū-hunna*, as meaning “beat them”, and the Holy Prophet was saying that these words do not necessarily mean “beat them”.

According to these reports it was at the insistence of Umar that the Holy Prophet allowed beating. If the Quran had allowed beating, it could not have happened that the Holy Prophet forbade it and then people asked him to allow what was already allowed in the Quran. Even then, the Holy Prophet’s view was that good Muslim men should not do this, and he set an example of it himself by not beating anyone at all. It is further notable that this personal example of the Holy Prophet has been included by the compiler of Hadith Ibn Majah immediately prior to the story about Umar asking the Holy Prophet to allow certain husbands to beat their wives.

The word *ḍarb* in Maulana Muhammad Ali’s English translation of the Quran

I have added this section for the attention of the readers of Maulana Muhammad Ali’s English translation of the Quran, in particular those for whom his interpretations are authoritative.

Maulana Muhammad Ali, in his 1917 edition of his English translation of the Quran, translated *idribū-hunna* as “beat them”. In his revised 1951 edition, he amended it to “chastise them”, and in his footnote under this verse he gave the explanation that very slight chastisement of the wife was allowed only in extreme cases, which should not leave an impression, and further that this permission is meant only for the crass type of people in society among whom such chastisement is an acceptable practice. It would appear that Maulana Muhammad Ali recognized that “beat” here is not an appropriate word, and “chastise” is more suitable because it is broader than just “beat” and includes other kinds of corrective measures.

Regarding the word *ḍarb* in general, Maulana Muhammad Ali has pointed out in his footnotes on verses 2:60 and 2:73, in a different context, that the verb *ḍarb* signifies “all kinds of actions except a few” (as we quoted from Arabic lexicons at the beginning of this article). He writes: “*Ḍarb* means *striking, smiting, marching on, going from place to place, setting forth a parable*, and carries a number of other significances.”

In 2:60 Moses is told to carry out the action of *ḍarb* on the rock with his staff (*iḍrib bi-‘aṣā-ka-l-ḥajara*). This is translated by almost all translators of the Quran into English in words such as: “Strike the rock with your staff”, but Maulana Muhammad Ali has translated it as: “March on to the rock with thy staff”.

In 2:73, Maulana Muhammad Ali translates the opening words as: “So We said: Smite him (*iḍribū-hu*) with it partially.” He considers the incident related in 2:72–73 as being the attempt by the Jews to kill Jesus, and explains that these words, “Smite him with it partially”, mean either “strike him with partial death” or “liken his condition to that of the partially dead man”. Almost all other translators render these words as literally striking a murdered person’s body with a piece of a slaughtered cow.

There is a verse in the Quran which, according to commentators, mentions the incident of a husband being commanded to beat his wife, again using the verb *iḍrib*, with a bunch of twigs. This is in the story of the prophet Job (Ayyūb) in 38:44. Commentators say that during Job’s terrible afflictions, his wife had shown impatience. So Job took the oath that, on recovery, he would punish her with a hundred lashes of the whip. But then Allah commanded him to be lenient and fulfil his oath only in a symbolic manner, using a handful of twigs. These words of 38:44 are almost universally translated along the following lines by English translators of the Quran:

“Take in thine hand a branch and smite therewith (*faḍrib-bihi*), and break not thine oath.”

“Take a small bunch of grass in your hand, and strike [her] with that so as not to break your oath.”

However, Maulana Muhammad Ali translates these words as:

“And take in thy hand few worldly goods and earn goodness therewith”.

The words which literally mean “strike with that” are translated by Maulana Muhammad Ali as “earn goodness therewith”. (In his 1917 edition, the Maulana had translated these words as “be satisfied with it”, i.e., be satisfied with just a few worldly goods.)

Hence, we see that in three verses of the Quran (2:60, 2:73 and 38:44), Maulana Muhammad Ali has not translated *ḍarb* as meaning hitting or striking an object or a person, whereas almost all other translators of the Quran in English in all these cases consider *ḍarb* to mean actual hitting. This provides a strong justification, on the basis of Maulana Muhammad Ali’s English translation of the Quran, for taking *ḍarb* in 4:34 as meaning some action other than physical beating of the wife.

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