

Surah 4. An-Nisaa

Asad: O YOU who have attained to faith! Do not devour one another's possessions wrongfully - not even by way of trade based on mutual agreement³⁸ - and do not destroy one another: for, behold, God is indeed a dispenser of grace unto you!

Malik: O believers! Do not consume one another's wealth through unlawful means; instead, do business with mutual consent; do not kill yourselves by adopting unlawful means. Indeed Allah is Merciful to you.

Pickthall: O ye who believe! Squander not your wealth among yourselves in vanity, except it be a trade by mutual consent, and kill not one another. Lo! Allah is ever Merciful unto you.

Yusuf Ali: O ye who believe! eat not up your property among yourselves in vanities: but let there be amongst you traffic and trade by mutual good-will: nor kill (or destroy) yourselves: for verily Allah hath been to you Most Merciful. ⁵⁴¹

Transliteration: Ya ayyuha allatheena amanoo la takuloo amwalakum baynakum bialbatili illa an takoona tijaratan AAan taradin minkum wala taqtuloo anfusakum inna Allaha kana bikum raheeman

Khatab:

O believers! Do not devour one another's wealth illegally, but rather trade by mutual consent. And do not kill each other or yourselves. Surely Allah is ever Merciful to you.

Author Comments

38 - If the particle illa preceding the above clause is given its usual meaning of "except" or "unless it be", the phrase ought to be rendered thus: "unless it be [an act of] trade based on mutual agreement". This formulation, however, has baffled many a commentator: for, if taken literally, it would imply that wrongful profits from trading based on mutual agreement are excepted from the general prohibition, "Devour not one another's possessions wrongfully" - a supposition impossible to maintain in view of the ethics postulated by the Qur'an. To obviate this difficulty, most of the commentators express the opinion that the particle illa has in this context the meaning of "but", and that the clause ought to be understood as follows: "but it is lawful for you to profit from one another's possessions by way of legitimate trade based on mutual agreement". However, quite apart from the fact that this interpretation is highly laboured and artificial, it does not explain why "legitimate trade" should have been singled out here as a sole means of lawfully deriving economic benefits from one another - for, as Razi rightly points out in his commentary on this verse, "it is no less lawful to benefit economically through a gift, a bequest, a legal inheritance, alms, a dower, or an indemnity for injuries received: for there are, aside from trade, many ways of acquiring possessions [lawfully]". Why, then, should trade alone have been stressed? - and, moreover, stressed in a context not particularly devoted to matters of trade? A really satisfactory answer to this puzzle can, in my opinion, be obtained only through a linguistic consideration of the particle illa. Apart from its usual connotation of "except" or "unless it be", it has sometimes - as has been pointed out in both Qamus and Mughni - the meaning of the simple conjunction "and" (wa); similarly, if it is preceded by a negative clause, it can be synonymous with "nor" or "and neither" (wa-la): as, for instance, in {27:10-11}, "no fear need the message-bearers have in My Presence, and neither (illa) need he who...", etc. Now if we apply this particular use of illa to the passage under consideration, we arrive at the reading, "nor [shall you do it] by means of trade based on mutual agreement", or simply, "not even by way of trade based on mutual

agreement" - whereupon the meaning immediately becomes obvious: the believers are prohibited from devouring another person's possessions wrongfully even if that other person - being the weaker party - agrees to such a deprivation or exploitation under the stress of circumstances. The reading adopted by me logically connects, moreover, with verse {32}, which admonishes the believers not to covet one another's possessions.

541 - Let me paraphrase this verse, for there is profound meaning in it. (1) All your property you hold in trust, whether it is in your name, or belongs to the community, or to people over whom you have control. To waste is wrong. (2) In ii. 188 the same phrase occurred, to caution us against greed. Here it occurs, to encourage us to increase property by economic use (traffic and trade), recalling Christ's parable of the Talents (Matt. xxv. 14-30), where the servants who had increased their master's wealth were promoted and the servant who had hoarded was cast into darkness. (3) We are warned that our waste may mean our own destruction ("nor kill or destroy yourselves.") But there is a more general meaning also: we must be careful of our own and other people's lives. We must commit no violence. This is the opposite of "trade and traffic by mutual good-will." (4) Our violence to our own brethren is particularly preposterous, seeing that Allah has loved and showered His mercies on us and all His creatures.

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