



PRINCIPLES OF ETHICAL CONDUCT IN SURAT AL-HUJURAT: A QUR'ANIC FRAMEWORK OF ADAB

An analysis of the moral norms governing the believer's relationship with God, the Prophet and society in the forty-ninth chapter of the Qur'an

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Abstract. *This article examines Surat al-Hujurat, the forty-ninth chapter of the Qur'an, as a concise yet comprehensive source of Islamic ethics. It first outlines the chapter's title, Medinan character and the occasions of revelation (asbab al-nuzul) associated with several of its verses. The study then analyses two major clusters of conduct set out in the chapter. The first concerns the believer's obligations toward God and His Messenger; namely obedience, reverence, God-consciousness (taqwa) and forbearance. The second concerns norms regulating relations within society, including the avoidance of suspicion, the prohibition of mockery, offensive nicknames, spying and backbiting, and the preservation of brotherhood and human equality. Drawing on classical exegetical works by Ibn Kathir, al-Qurtubi, al-Sa'di and Ibn 'Ashur, as well as hadith collections, the article argues that the ethical principles of Surat al-Hujurat are not limited to their historical context. Rather, they offer enduring guidance for building a culture of mutual trust and respect in contemporary society.*

Keywords: *Surat al-Hujurat, Qur'anic ethics, adab, taqwa, backbiting, suspicion, brotherhood, Islamic social ethics*

MAIN PART

The word hujurat is the plural of the Arabic hujra, meaning "room", "private chamber" or "dwelling". The chapter takes its title from verse 4, which refers to Bedouin visitors who called out loudly to the Prophet from outside his private quarters (Ibn Kathir, 1999:7/368). Because its content is devoted almost entirely to questions of proper behaviour, the chapter is frequently described in exegetical and popular literature as a "sura of manners" (adab), a characterisation that captures its central theme.



Surat al-Hujurat is a Medinan chapter, revealed after the Prophet's emigration (hijra) to Medina. It is the forty-ninth sura of the Qur'an, comprises eighteen verses and is located in the twenty-sixth part (juz') (Ibn 'Ashur, 1984:26/213). Its Medinan origin is reflected in its subject matter: whereas Meccan chapters concentrate chiefly on faith and the oneness of God (tawhid), Medinan chapters devote greater attention to social relations, legal rulings and norms of conduct.

Occasions of Revelation (Asbab al-Nuzul)

Works of Qur'anic exegesis report separate occasions of revelation for several verses of the chapter. According to these reports, the first five verses were revealed in connection with certain Companions or Bedouin tribesmen who raised their voices in the Prophet's presence or shouted for him from outside his home. Through these verses, the believers were taught the proper form of reverence owed to the Prophet (al-Wahidi, 1992:405).

The occasion most often cited for verse 6 concerns al-Walid ibn 'Uqba, who was sent to a tribe to collect alms (zakat). Before reaching them, apprehensive of their hostility, he returned with an inaccurate report that nearly provoked armed conflict. The incident taught the Muslim community that no report should be accepted without verification (al-Qurtubi, 1964:16/311). With respect to verse 11, narrations mention Companions who ridiculed one another on account of physical appearance or past failings. In relation to verse 12, some exegetes cite an episode in which Salman al-Farisi became the subject of backbiting after he had fallen asleep (al-Qurtubi, 1964:16/331). These concrete situations from daily life served as the immediate background to the chapter's verses on social conduct.

The opening section of the chapter (verses 1–5) is devoted entirely to the fundamental principles governing the believer's relationship with God and His Messenger. Four core norms of conduct can be identified in this section. The first verse instructs believers not to "put themselves forward" before God and His Messenger, that is, not to place their own opinions or decisions ahead of divine and prophetic rulings on any matter (Ibn Kathir, 1999:7/364). This represents one of the most basic expressions of faith: in every sphere of life, the believer should first turn to God's command and the Prophet's Sunna, and only then add personal judgement. Such obedience is presented not as mere compliance under compulsion but as a conscious choice arising from conviction.

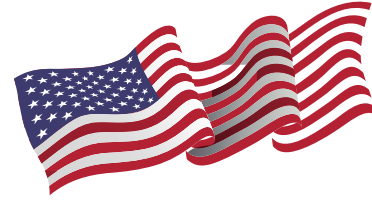


Verses 2 and 3 direct believers not to raise their voices above that of the Prophet and not to address him with the casual loudness they might use with one another. The text declares that God has tested the hearts of those who lower their voices in the Prophet's presence for piety, and that forgiveness and a great reward await them (al-Sa'di, 2000:799). Exegetes regard this principle as extending beyond the Prophet's lifetime, serving as a model for the respect due to elders, scholars and parents. Exhortations to "be mindful of God" recur several times throughout the chapter. Taqwa functions as the underlying foundation of every ethical norm in the sura, since a person observes proper conduct from inner conviction rather than for display only when aware that God observes them at every moment (al-Ghazali, n.d.:3/3). In this way, God-consciousness serves as the unifying core that binds together both the personal virtues and the social norms set out in the chapter.

Verse 5 states that those who called to the Prophet from outside would have done better to wait patiently until he came out to them, and it closes by affirming that God is All-Forgiving and Most Merciful. This teaches that a person who errs should be met with understanding rather than harsh punishment, leaving room for pardon (al-Sa'di, 2000:800). Believers, too, are encouraged to reflect this divine attribute by showing patience and forgiveness toward the mistakes of others.

The subsequent section of the chapter (verses 6–13) sets out specific ethical and legal norms that regulate the relations of community members with one another. This passage is regarded as one of the principal sources of Islamic social ethics.

Verse 12 commands believers to avoid unfounded negative assumptions about one another, declaring that "some suspicion is a sin" (Abdel Haleem, 2004:340). The prophetic tradition reinforces this teaching by describing suspicion as the most false form of speech (al-Bukhari, 2001:8/19). The rule aims to prevent mistrust and baseless accusation, since forming an adverse judgement about someone without clear evidence harms both the one who holds it and the fabric of social relations. Verse 11 forbids men from ridiculing other men and women from ridiculing other women, noting that those who are mocked may well be better than those who mock them. It likewise prohibits insulting one another with hurtful nicknames. The verse adds that it is an evil thing to be called by a name of disobedience after having believed, underscoring that such behaviour is incompatible with faith (Ibn Kathir, 1999:7/376).



The same verse 12 explicitly prohibits spying (tajassus) and backbiting (ghiba). It compares a backbiter to someone who eats the flesh of a dead brother, a vivid image that conveys how alien backbiting is to human dignity (al-Qurtubi, 1964:16/333). The Prophet defined backbiting as mentioning something about one's brother that he would dislike (Muslim, 1955:4/2001). Through these teachings, the chapter establishes the protection of personal privacy and reputation as an integral part of Islamic ethics. Verse 10 declares that "the believers are brothers" and assigns the community the duty of reconciling them whenever disputes arise. Verse 13 then explains that humanity was created in diverse peoples and tribes not so that one might dominate or claim superiority over another, but so that they might come to know one another (Asad, 1980:794). The verse concludes that the most honoured of people in the sight of God is the one most mindful of Him, thereby establishing the true criterion of equality and brotherhood among human beings (Ibn 'Ashur, 1984:26/258).

CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates that, despite its brevity, Surat al-Hujurat comprehensively addresses the principal dimensions of a believer's ethical life. It presents a wide-ranging system of conduct that extends from inner, spiritual virtues, including obedience, reverence, God-consciousness and forgiveness toward God and His Messenger, to outward social norms such as avoiding suspicion, refraining from backbiting, mockery and spying, and preserving brotherhood.

Surat al-Hujurat may therefore be regarded as one of the foundational sources of Islamic ethics. The principles it sets forth are not confined to a particular historical period; they remain enduring values capable of contributing significantly to a culture of mutual trust and respect in contemporary society.

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