

PARENTS IN THE HOLY QUR'ĀN: A STUDY OF THE CONCEPT OF *SHUKR*, *IḤSĀN* AND *BIRR AL- WĀLIDAYN*

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Abstract

The Holy Qur'ān abounds with rules of conduct and, taken in its entirety, establishes much of the way of life desired by Almighty Allah. It contains more exhortations than stipulations. Most of the Holy Qur'ān rallies Muslims to act justly and reframes their moral knowledge in a context of retribution and reward in this world and judgement and subsequent punishment and reward in the next. Several verses in the Holy Qur'ān include exhortations about parents. This study follows such Quranic verses to underline the fundamental rules and principles concerning the treatment of one's parents and explores the duties required of parents towards their children. It examines the semantics of certain terms used in discussions about filial piety, underlines their significance and explores some grammatical features. Furthermore, it examines bad behaviour towards parents from a Quranic perspective. The author argues that the Holy Qur'ān holds parents in such high esteem that respect and kindness towards them is considered second only in importance to worshipping Almighty Allah.

Keywords: *Gratitude, Iḥsān, birr al-wālidayn, 'Iqūq al-wālidayn*

Introduction

Parents are mentioned several times in the Holy Qur'ān and are allocated an extremely special place¹. It is well known that the Holy Qur'ān has a style of its own. It is not arranged in chapters according to the subject matter; rather, it combines several subjects such as faith, law and morals in one surah (chapter). Thus, rules and exhortations about parents, as with other subjects in the Holy Qur'ān, are included in various chapters in the Madinan and Makkan revelations. Showing parents benevolence and respect is extremely

important in Islam, and the Holy Qur'ān has shown that kindness to parents is inseparable from the worship of Allah.

Moreover, many *aḥādīth* urge kindness to parents. One such Ḥadīth states that one of the Companions asked the Prophet (Ṣalāh-u-‘alaihe wa sallam): ‘Which deed is the dearest to Allah?’ The Prophet (Ṣalāh-u-‘alaihe wa sallam) replied: ‘Performing prayer at its stated time’. The companion asked: ‘What is the next?’ the Prophet (Ṣalāh-u-‘alaihe wa sallam) replied: ‘بر الوالدين’ (*birr al-wālidayn*), to be good and dutiful to one’s parents’. The companion asked again: ‘What is the next?’ The Prophet (Ṣalāh-u-‘alaihe wa sallam) answered: ‘Fighting in Allah’s cause’ (جهاد)². Thus, the Prophet (Ṣalāh-u-‘alaihe wa sallam) considered *birr al-wālidayn* morally superior to fighting in Allah’s cause³ (also see below).

Generally, *birr al-wālidayn* signifies that a person should love, respect, support and be considerate towards their parents. Acts of filial piety include obeying parents’ wishes, taking care of them when they are old and working hard to provide them with material comforts such as food and money⁴. Parents give life to their children and support them throughout their developing years, providing food, education and material needs and bestowing them with unconditional love. After receiving these benefits, children are, thus, forever in debt to their parents. To acknowledge this eternal debt, children must respect and serve their parents all their lives.

By contrast, the term عقوق الوالدين (*‘iqūq al-wālidayn*) means disobeying one’s parents and treating them with disrespect. This includes a range of behaviours include ignoring their advice, frowning at them, looking at them with disdain, speaking to them harshly or with a tone of mockery and ridicule or shouting at them. The Holy Qur’ān states, ‘do not say to them “uff” (an expression of anger) and do not scold them, and address them with respectful words’⁵ (*al-Isrā’*, 17: 23).

Moreover, the Ḥadīth literature is replete with *aḥādīth* that warn against *‘iqūq al-wālidayn*. One such Ḥadīth considers *‘iqūq al-wālidayn* second only to the sin of Joining partners to Allah. The Prophet (Ṣalāh-u-‘alaihe wa sallam) is reported to have said, ‘Shall I inform you about the biggest of the greatest sins (أكبر الكبائر) [These are:] Joining partners to Allah (الشرك بالله) and *‘iqūq al-wālidayn*’⁶. Unfortunately, signs of *‘iqūq al-wālidayn* are becoming common features in several Muslim societies in the present era⁷. Exposure to Western societies by media or by habitation might have played a major role in this; moreover, in most cases, parents might have not instilled Islamic values in their children in the first place.

Literature review

The Arabic term بر الوالدين, meaning being dutiful, devoted and kind to one's parents, is used widely in Arabic literature, because, as mentioned, it occurs in many *aḥādīth*. Furthermore, the active participle of the word *birr*, which is *bārr*, is used in the Qur'ān as an attribute of two of the prophets, namely, Yaḥyā and 'Īsā (*Mariam*; 19: 14, 32).

Most of the classical scholars who wrote about *birr al-wālidayn* focus on the *aḥādīth* rather than the Qur'ān. Indeed, some of the available books on this subject, whether from the classical period, such as Muhammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) *Kitāb Birr al-Wālidayn* and Abū 'l-Faraj 'Abd 'l-Raḥān b. al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) *Birr 'l-Wālidayn*, or from the fairly recent period, such as Ahmad b. al-Ṣidīq al-Ghamārī (d. 1380/1960) *Kitāb Birr al-Wālidayn al-Musammā Maṭāli' al-Budūr*, only comprise *aḥādīth* about the subject. Some of these *aḥādīth* might not be termed authentic (*Ṣaḥīḥ*) or even good (*Ḥasan*). This is because Ḥadīth scholars are not concerned about the reliability of *aḥādīth* regarding *birr al-wālidayn*, as much as they are about the reliability of the *aḥādīth* that include provisions and stipulations on the legality of Muslims' acts⁸. The subject of *birr al-wālidayn* is considered to be part of a group of *aḥādīth* known as *riqāq*, that is, *aḥādīth* that soften the heart⁹ and refers to *aḥādīth* that include exhortations and recommendation on how to lead a God-fearing life, recommend charitable acts and talk about the goodness of the Hereafter and how to aspire to it¹⁰. Thus, al-Bukhārī includes many *aḥādīth* in his *Kitāb Birr al-Wālidayn* that are not included in his book of authentic Ḥadīth, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.

Muhammad b. al-Walīd al-Ṭarṭūshī (d. 520/1116) is the author who included a discussion of some of the Quranic verses about *birr al-wālidayn*, although the majority of his compilation consists of *aḥādīth*, reports from the Companions and anecdotes from the early Islamic periods. In his interpretation of verse 14 of chapter 31, *Luqmān*: 'Be grateful to Me and to your parents', Ṭarṭūshī divides gratitude into three categories: The first is feeling gratitude in one's heart, the second is expressing gratitude by words and the third is showing gratitude by deeds. The first category is achieved when a person knows in their heart that all bounties are from Allah Almighty; that is assured by a verse in *Surat al-Naḥl*; 16: 53: 'Whatever blessing you have is from Allah'. The second category is achieved by submission to Allah Almighty and offering Him thanks, as He says: 'So remember Me, and I will remember you, and be thankful to Me' (*al-Baqarh*,; 2:152). The third category can be achieved by performing all duties and abstaining from all forbidden things and acts. All categories relate to Allah Almighty, but only the second and

third categories relate to humans, that is, thanking by words and offering help and service. The first category cannot relate to humans because all bounties, in whatever form, originate from Allah Almighty. However, parents are in a place above what is due to other humans, but below what is due to the Almighty alone. They do not deserve the first category because Allah Almighty is the Creator and Giver of the bounty of life, but they are above other humans because they are the means through which this bounty is given¹¹.

Ahmed Shawqī Ibrāhīm analyses Quranic verses, *aḥādīth*, reports from the Companions, and anecdotes from the early generations of Islam to enumerate aspects of *birr al-wālidayn*. From his discussion, it appears that a person must answer their parents if any of them addresses them during the performance of a prayer as long as it is not a prescribed prayer¹². Meanwhile, other scholars argue that if the person knows that the parent will not be offended if they continue with the prayer then they should continue¹³. Furthermore, a person must ask their parents' permission to travel, unless it is for *hajj*¹⁴. However, some scholars believe that if the parents refuse to grant permission to their adult child to perform *hajj*, they should be obeyed unless it is the prescribed pilgrimage in which case their child can go without obtaining their permission. Although other scholars hold that a person should keep trying year after year to get their permission, even if it is for the prescribed pilgrimage¹⁵.

Moreover, a person must ask their parents' permission to go for *jihād* and refrain from going if they refuse to grant them permission. That *birr al-wālidayn* comes above *jihād* in importance is agreed upon by all scholars who wrote about the subject¹⁶. This is because it is confirmed by Ḥadīths mentioned by Bukhārī and Muslim that a man came to the Prophet (*Ṣal Allāh-u-‘alaihe wa sallam*) asking his permission to take part in *jihād*. The Prophet (*Ṣal Allāh-u-‘alaihe wa sallam*) asked him, 'Are your parents alive?' He replied in the affirmative. The Prophet (*Ṣal Allāh-u-‘alaihe wa sallam*) said to him, 'Then make your *jihād* on them¹⁷'; that is, exert yourself in their service.

However, scholars disagree on whether a man should divorce his wife if his parents ask him to do so. It should be noted that Muslim scholars are very cautious on matters of divorce, especially if children are involved¹⁸; jurists usually advise men not to resort to divorce unless for very compelling reasons¹⁹. In the same vein, Muhammad Ṣāliḥ al-Munjid argues that parents cannot force their son to marry a particular woman if he is not willing. This is analogous to forcing someone to eat food for which he does not have an appetite when other types of food are available, but a person must be very gentle with his parents when trying to convince them of his unwillingness to marry the woman they chose for him²⁰.

Parents in the Holy Qur'an:**i. Showing Gratitude (*shukr*) to Parents**

The best place to start seems to be the verse that reminds a man of the role his parents play in his life right from the start;

We commanded man (to be good) in respect of his parents. His mother carried him (in her womb) despite weakness upon weakness, and his weaning is in two years. (We said to man,) "Be grateful to Me and to your parents. To Me is the ultimate return" (Luqmān; 31: 14).

The chapter that includes this verse is a Makkan revelation. As such, it discusses faith as a major theme. The discussion here appears as a contrast between the believers and the unbelievers and their rewards and punishment in the Hereafter; it also draws attention to the Almighty's powers manifested in His creation of the earth and heavens, humans, day and night and sun and moon. In the middle of this comes the verse under discussion, followed by,

However, if they force you (جاهدك jāhadāk) to ascribe partners to Me, about whom you (can) have no (source of) knowledge, then do not obey them. Remain with them in this world with due fairness, but follow the way of the one who has turned himself towards Me (Luqmān: 31: 15).

The fact that these two verses appear in the heart of a *Surah* of thirty-four verses, thirty of which discuss dogma, indicates that the subject in discussion is just as important as faith from a Quranic view.

The above two verses come in a set of verses (12-19) in which the wise Luqmān was giving his son advice. The set starts by informing the reader that this Luqmān was a special person²¹. He was a man upon whom Allah had bestowed wisdom, a fact mentioned, perhaps, to draw attention to what is about to be said about or by him. From the same verse, it can be deduced that the first manifestation of wisdom is that a person is thankful to his Lord. It is in the nature of man to thank those who help him, which makes Allah Almighty the most worthy of praise. Although Allah Almighty, exalted is He, does not benefit from humans' gratitude, however, showing gratitude to Him is a form of increasing His blessing, as verse 12 of the same chapter states '*and whoever is grateful, is grateful for his own benefit*'; and also promised by Allah Almighty in other Quranic verses (e.g. *Āl 'imrāni*; 3:144-145; *Ibrāhīm*; 14: 7; and *al-Naml*; 27: 40)²². The second manifestation of wisdom appears in taking care of raising one's children and nurturing them to believe in the existence of Allah Almighty. This appears in that, after stating that Luqmān was granted wisdom by Allah Almighty and enjoined by Him to be

thankful to Him, the sura turns immediately to describing him exhorting his son: '(Remember) when Luqmān said to his son when he was advising him: "My dear son, do not ascribe partners to Allah. Indeed, ascribing partners to Allah (shirk) is a grave transgression"' (Luqmān Q. 31: 13).

The verse forms an image in the mind, an image of Luqmān speaking gently to his son, giving him very important advice, starting with the affectionate call for attention *yā bunayyā* (my dear son). Meaning 'my little boy', *yā bunayyā* is usually used as a term of endearment. It has been observed that by using this affectionate tone, Allah Almighty tells us that a solid foundation of love, affection, care and connection is a precondition for successful communication and effective advice²³. The next two verses, instead of continuing with the scene of Luqmān advising his son, change from a monologue to stating facts, with Allah Almighty speaking in the first person majestic plural (*We*) about *birr al-wālidayn* (Luqmān, verses 14, 15 copied above). After that, the monologue of Luqmān continues. This shift is dramatic. The Holy Qur'ān is trying to show the importance of the subject of parents by changing the mode of speech during the couple of verses that discuss the subject. Moreover, verse 14 features a type of *iltifāt*. *Iltifāt* (lit. turning)—a prominent stylistic feature of the Holy Qur'ān—is a grammatical shift, most commonly in the person between the first, second and third person, the function of which is to attract the reader's attention or raise their interest²⁴. Verse 14 starts with Allah Almighty speaking about man in the third person singular; '*We commanded man ...*', at the end of the verse the mode changed to addressing man in the second person singular: '*Be grateful to Me ...*'. In addition, in verse 15, Allah Almighty addresses man in the second person singular at the start of the verse, then changes to the second person plural at the end of the verse. Thus, in two verses, there are three stylistic features that are meant to draw attention to the importance of the subject. The first of them—the change from human monologue to the Almighty speaking—in the writer's view, is the most powerful and effective, and as it is very rare in the Holy Qur'ān, its use in discussing this subject is significant.

Considering these two verses from a humanistic perspective, it appears that in a concise, eloquent and very expressive few words, Allah gives a summary of the child–parent relationship and presents a picture of the affection of the parents, especially the mother. After stating the general: '*We commanded man (to be good) in respect of his parents*', the verse turns immediately to the specific, which is the role of the mother, reminding man of her suffering during pregnancy, childbirth and nursing. Only pure feelings that have been endowed by Allah Almighty will make a woman endure such suffering. Therefore, when the Almighty is advising man concerning his parents, He is not

reminding him of material favours, which can be volatile. He is reminding him of permanent affection and unconditional love. Furthermore, the fact that the mother deserves more consideration is emphasised by the Ḥadīth. A man came to the Prophet (*Ṣal Allāh-u-‘alaihe wa sallam*) and asked the following.

‘Who is the person who is most entitled to be treated the best by me?’ The Prophet (*Ṣal Allāh-u-‘alaihe wa sallam*) replied: ‘Your mother’; the man asked: ‘Who is next?’ The Prophet answered: ‘Your mother’; the man asked again: ‘Who is next?’ The Prophet (*Ṣal Allāh-u-‘alaihe wa sallam*) again answered: ‘Your mother’; the man asked for the fourth time: ‘Who is next?’ to which the Prophet’s reply was: ‘Your father’.²⁵

Thus, according to this Ḥadīth, mothers deserve three times the amount of attention and consideration due to fathers²⁶. The reason for this is perhaps that, in addition to the fact that the mother endures the hardship of pregnancy and childbirth, women are usually more affectionate than men. They are also more vulnerable so they need more attention.

Having reminded man of his parents’ affection, Allāh Almighty orders him to bestow thanks on his Lord and parents. The significance of this clause ‘*Be grateful to Me and to your parents*’ is that although Almighty Allāh starts the verse with the thanks due to Him, He uses the conjunction ‘*wa*’ (and) which, according to philologists, signifies sharing but not necessarily sequence²⁷. There are two points to be considered. First, the Allāh Almighty used the verb ‘*ishkur*’ (be grateful) only once, for Himself and the parents together. Second, He joined the parents to Himself using the conjunction ‘*wa*’—instead of using ‘*fa*’, which is a conjunction that signifies a sequence, or ‘*thumma*’, which is a conjunction that signifies sequence but with a time-lag²⁸, making showing gratitude to parents as close in importance to showing gratitude to Himself as it can be.

The following verse (*Luqmān*: 15) mentions the worst thing a parent can do to their child, which is to try to make them deviate from the straight path—the path that, from a Quranic view, is known traditionally and logically. Hence, the verse saying, ‘*However, if they force you to ascribe partners to Me, about whom you (can) have no (source of) knowledge, then do not obey them*’, for Almighty Allāh, from a Quranic view, is known to all people, but anything else polytheists may join to Him in worship cannot possibly be known as a god to everybody. Verse 172 of *Surah al-A‘rāf*, is such that belief in Allāh as the only God and Lord of all people is instilled naturally in all humans from even before the revelations. It is stated all over the

Holy Qur'ān that associating partners with Allah Almighty or denying His existence is the highest wrong-doing and is the only sin that Allah Almighty does not forgive. To show the importance of filial piety, Allah Almighty here is saying to man that even if your parents insist that you (*jāhadāk*) commit the greatest sin of associating other gods to Me, still keep their company and keep treating them with kindness and politeness²⁹; however, with a very important caveat—‘do not obey them’. The importance of ‘do not obey them’ is manifested in that it comes before ‘*Remain with them in this world with due fairness*’ and that having asked man to continue being good to his parents, comes again with the exhortation to follow the path of those who believe in Allah Almighty. Evidently, nothing can give a person permission to a person to treat his parents badly; even their consistent efforts to make him a polytheist or a disbeliever do not give him such permission. Moreover, if the person knows that he may predecease his parents, he is ordered by the Almighty to leave them a bequest in his will (*al-Baqarah*; 2: 180). This is because according to Islamic rules of inheritance, a non-Muslim must not inherit from a Muslim (see below).

ii. *Ihsān* (kindness) to Parents

The sudden change in the mode of speech to attract attention is used in other verses concerned with filial piety. The holy Qur'ān says:

Say (O Prophet to the infidels) Come, I shall recite what your Lord has prohibited for you: Do not associate anything with Him (as His partner)', and then suddenly a shift from prohibition to command: 'And be good to parents (وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا) bil-wālidayn ihsān). (Al-An'ām; 6:151)

The same verse goes back to prohibitions starting with:

And do not kill your children because of poverty... and do not go near shameful acts whether they are open or secret, and do not kill a person whom Allah has given sanctity, except rightfully.

Notably, the command to be good (*ihsān*) to parents is placed directly next to the prohibition of polytheism, which is another dramatic shift that shows the importance of the subject.

Moreover, *ihsān* to parents is mentioned immediately next to believing in monotheism in many other verses of the Holy Qur'ān³⁰—(in addition to verses discussed in this paper, see *Surah al-Nisā*; 4: 36; *Surah al-Ankabūt*; 29: 7-8)—most of them are Makkan

revelations. This is significant as the main concern of Makkan revelations, as is well known, was about faith and establishing the principles of that faith. Chapter 17, *al-Isrā'*, which is a middle-Makkan revelation³¹, includes a set of verses (23–25) concerning filial piety coming at the head of a set of verses (23–39) which include the principles of social and moral behaviour. The subject of our concern not only comes as the first, meaning the most important of these injunctions but also as noted, second only to the essence of Islam, which is monotheism.

In the first set of verses discussed above, the subject was mentioned as an urgent instruction ‘وصينا’ (*waṣṣayyinā* ‘commanded’) (*Surah Luqmān*; 31: 14). In *Surah al-Isrā'*; 17: 23, it is mentioned as a rule and a principle of belief: ‘Your Lord has decreed (قضى *qaḍā*) that you worship none but Him, and do good (*iḥsān*) to parents’. The significance of this verse is in the use of the term *qaḍā* (decreed). Since the subject is the essence of faith, Allah used the strong term *qaḍā*; and since Allah Almighty has decreed that nothing is to be worshipped save Him, He decreed that what is due to the parents comes immediately after what is due to Him. Two points can be drawn from this verse: The first is that, from a Quranic view, the only thing that should come before a person’s concern and thinking of his/her parents is the concern for and thinking of Almighty Allah; second, since ‘*ibādah* (worship) is due to none save Allah Almighty, what is due to the parents comes in place next to ‘*ibādah*, and that is *iḥsān*.

Five out of the seven verses that are concerned with filial piety include the word *iḥsān* (*Surah al-Baqara*; 2: 83; *Surah al-Nisā'*; 4: 36; *Surah al-An‘ām*; 6: 151; *Surah al-Isrā'*; 17: 23; *Surah al-Aḥqāf*; 46: 15). One verse (*Surah al-‘Ankabūt*; 29: 8) uses the word *ḥusn*; that is in addition to the verse discussed above, which uses the word *ishkur* (be grateful). In trying to determine why verse (*Surah al-‘Ankabūt*; 29: 8) uses *ḥusn* instead of *iḥsān*, from the context and semantically, it appears that in all the verses that use the word *iḥsān*, the parents are believers; in verse (*Surah al-‘Ankabūt*; 29: 8) the parents are not. The verse states: ‘We have instructed man to do good (*ḥusn^{an}*) to his parents; and if they insist upon you (*jahadāka*) that you should ascribe partners to Me, then do not obey them’. Linguistically, both words, *iḥsān* and *ḥusn*, come from the root *ḥ, s, n*. *Ḥusn* is a noun, whereas *iḥsān* is a verbal noun, so there is not much difference in meaning between the two words. One possible interpretation is that in the verses where the parents are believers, the word is used in the emphatic form. One of the functions of a verbal noun in the Arabic language is to emphasise the verb of that noun. Therefore, in the sentence: *iḥsin iḥsān^{an}*, the first word, *iḥsin*, is an imperative and the second, *iḥsān*, is to emphasise that command. Thus, the verses could

have been *ihsin li-wālidayk ihsānā^{an}* (show real kindness to your parents). It is also noticeable that in both verses where the word *ihsān* is not used, the parents are disbelievers who may try to make the child join their faith (see above, discussion of *Surah Luqmān*; 31: 15) and both verses use the term *jahadāka* (insist upon you) making the child turn away from the right path; as noted, verse 31: 14 uses the term *ishkur* (be grateful). As these are the only two verses about filial piety that do not use *ihsān*, this makes one wonder if *shukr* (gratitude) and *husn*, are of less value than *ihsān*.

The nearest translation of the word *ihsān*, kindness, does not do justice to the word. Thinking of *ihsān* as something that is considered only second to worshipping, Allah gives an idea of the word's richness. This is confirmed by a Ḥadīth from the Prophet (*Ṣal Allah-u-'alaihe wa sallam*) that '*ihsān is to worship Allah as if you see Him, and if you cannot achieve this state of devotion then you must consider that He is looking at you.*'³² Furthermore, this Ḥadīth adds another dimension to the meaning of the word, which is that good deeds should come from the heart and for the sake of Allah Almighty are only to be considered *ihsān*. This dimension accords with the third verse of the set being discussed (*al-Isrā'*; 17: 25) '*Your Lord knows best what is in your hearts. If you are righteous, then He is most Forgiving to those who turn to Him in repentance.*'

Having ordered man to treat his parents with *ihsān*, Allah explains certain aspects of this *ihsān*—'*If any of them or both of them reach old age, do not say to them; "uff" (a word or expression of anger or contempt) and do not scold them and address them with respectful words*' (*al-Isrā'*; 17: 23). Naturally, old age is the time during which a parent most needs their child. When the parents are in their old age, the children are usually in their youth. This can be between the ages of 20 and 50 or may be even older, which is the busiest time in a person's life³³. This person might become annoyed that they have to take care of their parents as well; hence, Allah Almighty orders man to be patient with his parents and not to say '*uff*' to them, which is, as Ibn Kathīr observes, the least sign of disrespect³⁴ as well as to speak to them with honour and respect.

A person whose heart is full of faith would take full care of their parents without even asking their siblings to contribute to the task. Thus, the third verse in this set (verse 25) states that Allah Almighty knows what is inside a person's heart. Unfortunately, Western societies do not care for these lessons. Young children are rude to their parents and show disobedience. As the parents grow old, they drive them out of their homes and put them in senior citizens' homes³⁵. Grown-up children cannot spare the time to attend to the needs of ageing parents. Moreover, busy Western life has led to a

break-up of the family unit, which is firmly upheld in Islam. The closing sentence of this verse is a gentle and merciful way to assure those who once treated their parents badly (this could have been during childhood—the age of ignorance—or in early youth—the age of impetuosity—or due to other reasons) that Allah Almighty is all-forgiving as long as the person is repentant.

The second verse of this set (*Surah al-Isrā'*; 17: 24) is a beautiful, moving picture of yet another aspect of *ihsān*—‘*and submit yourself before them in humility out of compassion*’ (وَاخْفِضْ لَهُمَا جَنَاحَ الذَّلِيلِ مِنَ الرَّحْمَةِ). The term *ikhfīḍ janāḥ* (lit. lower the wing) is a metaphoric Arabic expression for mercy. The Prophet (*Ṣal Allahu alaihe wa sallam*) is asked by Allah Almighty twice in the Holy Qur’ān to lower his wing to the believers (*Surah al-Hijr*; 15: 88; *Surah al-Shu‘arā'*; 26: 215). In the case of the child–parent relationship, the word *dhull* (humility) is added to show the degree to which a child is expected to honour and respect their parents. The eloquence of the verse is shown even more in the following sentence: ‘*And say: My Lord! be merciful to them, as they brought me up in my childhood*’. It might be difficult for some people to imagine themselves as old and feeble, as their parents are now; hence, a reminder is needed that we were once in such a weak and helpless state and that our parents were the ones who took care of us then³⁶ (also see below). As parents’ care of their children is bestowed naturally and unconditionally³⁷, in contrast to a child’s care for their parents, which might be out of duty only, Allah Almighty is the only one fit to reward the parents. Therefore, all these rules and duties are insufficient for a child towards their parents; the child should also ask Allah Almighty to give them real rewards ‘*and say, My Lord! Be merciful to them ...*’

Verse 15 of *Surah al-Aḥqāf* uses the term *ihsān* with a sentiment similar to that of verse 14 of *Surah Luqmān*, as it uses the term *waṣṣayyinā* (enjoined/commanded) followed by a description of childbearing and giving birth: ‘*And We have enjoined upon man to do good to his parents. His mother carried him with difficulty and delivered with difficulty*’ (*Surah al-Aḥqāf*; 46: 15). This chapter is another Makkan revelation that discusses dogma as the main theme. The subject of filial piety is discussed in three verses (15–17) which, similar to *Surah Luqmān*, are at the heart of the chapter. However, there is nothing in this set to suggest that the parents are disbelievers. The verses that precede the set discussing filial piety in *Surah al-Aḥqāf* describe believers in contrast to disbelievers.

Surely, those who say: our Lord is Allah, and then stay firm, they will have no fear, nor shall they grieve. Those are the

people of Paradise who will live there forever, as a reward for what they used to do. (Surah al-Aḥqāf; 46: 13-14).

Having assured the people who already believed in Him, Allah Almighty goes on to show them the way to gain increased rewards from Him, and that is *birr al-wālidayn*—‘*And We have enjoined man to do good to his parents ...*’ Subsequently, the chapter divides people into two groups. Those who are guided justly are represented by the image of the person who becomes more pious and more devoted to their Lord and their parents when they become more mature and strong

...until, when he attains his maturity and reaches forty years, he says: My Lord! Grant me that I offer Gratitude for the favour You have bestowed upon me and upon my parents, and that I do righteous deeds that You like. And set righteousness, for my sake, in my progeny (Surah al-Aḥqāf; 46: 15).

Here, again, is one of the Holy Qur'ān's beautiful stylistic features. The verse starts with ‘*And We have enjoined upon man iḥsān to his parents*’ to present a picture of a grown human being instructed by his Lord. It moves smoothly from the grown-up man to talking about him when he was a foetus inside his mother's womb ‘*His mother carried him with difficulty*’ and then after his birth and being nursed by her, till he is well grown again and ‘*reaches forty years*’. In two lines, the verse depicts the growing process, starting with a grown man being instructed by his Lord, going back to when he was a foetus and moving on with him till he is grown again, and in the most mature age, praying for his parents and his offspring (Holy Qur'ān 46: 15). This is a reminder of the continuous cycle that is inevitable for humans.

These four verses (*Surah al-Aḥqāf; 13-16*) complement each other. They start by describing those who believe in Allah Almighty. The second verse (v 14) goes on to show them how to perfect this belief; the last sentence in this verse, *I repent to you, and truly I am of those who submit to You*. Then added to the next verse:

Such are the people from whom We accept the best of what they did, and overlook their evil deeds, (so as they will be) among the people of Paradise according to the true promise that was made to them (Surah al-Aḥqāf; 46: 14).

Assure those believers that it is not too late if they have not been good previously, because they can always repent and Allah Almighty always forgives the repentant. Interestingly, the contrast against the justly guided is not represented as ‘he who deviates from

the right path says to his parents'. It is represented in the image of 'the one who said to his parents: fie upon you both. Do you promise to me that I shall be brought out (from the grave) while generations have passed before me? (Surah al-Aḥqāf; 46: 17). Thus, it gives the image of an ungrateful child treating his parents badly before presenting the person as a disbeliever, which is to come in the following verse, putting more emphasis on the former condition, as if to say that treating one's parents badly (عقوق الوالدين) will lead one to such a state:

Such are the people on whom the word (of punishment) has come true along with communities of the Jinn and the humans that has passed before them. Surely they are the losers. (Surah al-Aḥqāf; 46.18).

Before presenting the threatening verse, the chapter shows the attitude of the right type of parents towards a rebellious child; parents who are confronted by a child who speaks to them harshly, not because they were harsh or unkind to the child, but on the contrary, because they are trying to guide the child to the right path. What was the parents' reaction? It was not anger, outrage or repudiation of their child. Instead, they turned towards Allah in a pleadingly, asking for His help (v.17). The sentence 'were crying for Allah's help' represents vividly a picture of the parents who are extremely worried about a child, albeit an ungrateful one. The image of those parents complements the image of the person who is described as previously praying to Allah Almighty to make his offspring righteous (v.15).

iii. Providing for parents

In Madinah, the revelation was for a community whose faith had been established, so it addresses the moral and social aspects of Muslim society. However, when it comes to parents, it displays the same most important features—that kindness to parents is a command from Allah Almighty and that it comes second only in importance to believing in monotheism. The only difference is that, since in Makkah the faith had not quite become established, Allah Almighty used powerful words such as 'decree' and 'enjoin', whereas the Madinan verse, *al-Nisā*, Q. 4: 36 merely says 'And worship Allah, and do not associate with Him anything, and be good to parents (وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا)'.

Since in Makkah the idea of *birr al-wālidayn* was being introduced, it was restricted to the most important, which is treating them with kindness and gentleness and bestowing thanks on them. In Madinah, the idea of *iḥsān* was expanded to include providing for parents and was also to include relatives other than parents³⁸. In the

second chapter of the Holy Qur'ān, which is a Madinan revelation, *ihsān* to parents and vulnerable members of society—namely, orphans and the poor—is mentioned as instructions to the Children of Israel (the Jews) and mentioned before performing prayer and giving *Zakat*:

'(Remember) when We took a pledge from the Children of Israel: you shall not worship anyone other than Allah, and you shall do good to the parents and to the near of kin and to orphans and the needy, and say to people what is good; and be steadfast in Ṣalah (prayer) and pay the Zakah'. (Surah al-Baqarah; 2: 83)

It has been stated above that the prophets 'Īsā and Yaḥyā ('*Alaihim As-Salām*) have been described as *bārr*, indicating that *birr al-wālidayn* is not only an obligation for Muslims but also *ahl al-Kitāb*³⁹ (Jews and Christians).

The Holy Qur'ān makes it obligatory for a Muslim to leave some of his money to his parents in case he should predecease them. The matter is of such importance that two affirmative conditions are used in this small verse; first, the use of the word *kutiba* (enjoined), which makes it an obligation; second, the use of the word *ḥaqq* (obligation) to confirm that it is more than just a matter of bestowing favours.

It is enjoined upon you, when death approaches any of you, and he leaves some wealth, that he must bequeath for the parents and the nearest of kin in the approved manner, being an obligation on the God-fearing. (Surah al-Baqarah; 2: 180)

The importance of the subject also shows in that it was introduced in a very early Madinah *surah*⁴⁰ and before revealing other rules of inheritance. When the rules of inheritance were revealed (*Surah al-Nisā'*; 4:11-12), according to some scholars, the above verse was abrogated, and the parents were allotted their share according to these rules. Other scholars hold that the verse was not abrogated; it is meant for non-Muslim parents⁴¹. As noted, one of the stipulated conditions of inheritance in Islam is that the heir must be a Muslim.

It is significant that the Holy Qur'ān uses the derivative of the word *والد* (*wālid*, lit. the one who gives birth) in all the verses that urge *ihsān*, whereas in the verse that sets the inheritance rules (*al-Nisā'*, Q. 4:11), it uses the word *أبويه* (*abawayhi*, which is derived from *abb*, parent). None of the classical exegeses consulted discuss this point. The present author's view, however, is that since *ihsān* is a

fundamental matter of faith that comes second only to believing in Allah Almighty, Allah Almighty restricted it to *al-wālidayn* (lit. the two who give birth) of the person. The word *wālid* is the active participle of *yalid* (to give birth). Hence, *wālid* never appears in the Qur'ān as plural; it is always either in the singular form, *wālid/wālidah* (father/mother) or dual, *wālidayn*. Furthermore, the term *wālid* reminds man of the role of his parents in his life, that they were the cause of his existence, the close intimacy between himself and them, they are physically a part of them that is growing independently. Meanwhile, with material subjects, the terms used are the derivatives of *abb* which, although it means father or parent, in classical Arabic, it can be extended to mean grandparents and uncles. It is used in the Holy Qur'ān to indicate humanity's original parents, Adam and Eve (*Surah al-A'raf*, 7: 27), and to indicate grandparents and uncles:

Is it that you were present when death approached Ya 'qūb, when he said to his sons: What will you worship after me? They said: We will worship your God and the God of your fathers, Abrāhīm, Ismā'īl (Ishmael) and Ishāq (Isaac). (Surah al-Baqarah; 2:133)

According to exegeses, Abrāhīm ('*Alaih As-Salām*) was Jacob's ('*Alaih As-Salām*) grandfather and Ismā'īl ('*Alaih As-Salām*) was his uncle⁴². Furthermore, verse 99 of *Surah Yūsuf* says the following about Yūsuf: '*He took his parents to him*'. The term used is *abawayhi* (his two parents). The Holy Qur'ān did not use *wālidayhi* (the two who gave birth to him) because Jacob's (Yūsuf's father) wife at the time was not Yūsuf's mother but his maternal aunt. His mother died when he was a child as stated in the Old Testament⁴³. As classical exegeses did not differentiate between *al-abawayn* (the two parents) and *al-wālidayn* (the two who gave birth), they all state that there are two opinions about Yūsuf's mother's death. Some argue that there was nothing to confirm her death when Yūsuf ('*Alaih As-Salām*) was a child⁴⁴. However, the use of the term *abawayh* instead of *wālidayh* in the verse can be considered a confirmation of what is in the Old Testament that Yūsuf's mother died when he was a child. By contrast, in chapter 5, verse 110, where Allah Almighty was addressing the Prophet Jesus ('*Alaih As-Salām*), '*O Jesus, son of Mary! Remember My blessing upon you and upon your mother*', the term used to indicate mother is *wālidatik* (lit. the woman who gave birth to you), whereas in the verse that states rules of inheritance, the term used to indicate the mother is *ummih*, meaning mother as well as grandmothers (*Surah al-Nisā'*, 4: 11).

As noted, verse 11 of *al-Nisā'*, stating rules of inheritance, uses *abawayhi* rather than *wālidayhi* to indicate parents and *ummih*,

rather than *wālidatih*, to indicate mother; hence, it is agreed upon in Islam that if the parents of the deceased predeceased them, their share is to be given to the grandparents should they be living. The verse that speaks of bequest, *Surah al-Baqarah*; 2: 180, uses the term *wālidayn*. According to this study, this supports the argument of scholars who believe that the verse is not abrogated; it is meant for non-Muslim parents. As the bequest is given to a non-Muslim and it is described as a prescribed duty, it is limited to *al-wālidayn* (the two who gave birth) only.

In Madinah, the faith was established and the Muslims were concerned about their duties according to the rules of their new community. They used to ask the Prophet (*Ṣal Allah-u-'alaihe wa sallam*) about various subjects appearing in the second chapter in verses that start with the word *yas'alūnak* (they ask you). There is a set of verses in this chapter (215-222) including questions about many topics, the first of which is an enquiry into how to spend one's money. In the answer, Allah Almighty identified *al-wālidayn* as the first due to receive a share in a Muslim's money, followed by *al-aqrabīn* (close relatives). Here, there was no need to use *al-bawayn*, because grandparents are included in *al-aqrabīn*. Moreover, *al-wālidayn* is mentioned separately and at the head of all categories for emphasis; other categories include orphans, the needy and travellers (*al-Baqarah*, Q. 2: 215). Many other verses in the Qur'ān refer to those on whom money should be spent where parents are not mentioned. This is, perhaps, because these verses are regarding *ṣadaqāt* (charity), whereas spending on parents is a duty. This is confirmed by Ḥadīth when the Prophet (*Ṣal Allah-u-'alaihe wa sallam*) said to a person who was complaining that his father takes from his money without permission: '*You and your money belong to your father*⁴⁵'.

Concluding Remarks

Chapter 49 of the Holy Qur'ān, *Surat al-Hujrāt*, is concerned primarily with civility and good manners. It starts with five verses advising Muslims to respect the Prophet (*Ṣal Allah-u-'alaihe wa sallam*), which can be analogically extended to include all Muslim leaders. Furthermore, the chapter addresses the Muslim community as one family, as it states in verse 10, '*All believers are but brothers*', and advises members of this family on what leads to its integrity and prosperity. This includes not ridiculing or insulting one another, not calling each other by offensive nicknames (verse 11), avoiding making negative assumptions about each other and not spying on or maligning each other (verse 12). There is no mention of parents or how to treat them in this chapter. By contrast, chapters that include verses about filial piety are concerned with the fundamental issues in Islam, such as the existence of Allah Almighty and manifestations of

His powers, the importance of believing in Him, worshipping no one but Him, turning to Him in times of need, the importance of being steadfast in performing religious duties, the rewards that await the believers and warning the disbelievers of the inescapable punishment that awaits them for denying Allah's existence and the Resurrection.

Except for 4:36, all the verses concerned with filial piety are preceded by verses that discuss dogma; moreover, four of them are followed by verses that discuss dogma. The rest are followed by verses that discuss other fundamental issues from an Islamic view, such as warning against killing one's child for fear of poverty, committing obscenities, killing another person without legal justification, appropriating orphans' property for oneself (*Surah al-An'ām*; 6:151–152) and the command of providing relatives, the needy and wayfarers their due (*Surah al-Isrā'*; 17:26). Chapter 4, *Surah al-Nisā'*, is primarily concerned with family ties. It speaks of marriage laws and urges Muslims to treat orphans and women⁴⁶ with justice. The majority of the verses of this chapter are concerned with the welfare of the Muslim community. Perhaps this is the reason why the verse that speaks of *birr al-wālidayn* (v. 36) is preceded by a verse that urges the community to reconcile couples before their marriage breaks down: *'If you fear a split between them (the spouses,) send an arbiter from his people and one from her people. If they desire to set things right, Allah shall bring about harmony between them'*. (*Surah al-Nisā'*; 4: 35)

The Holy Qur'ān also discuss what is due to the parents after their demise. This includes praying to Allah Almighty to grant them forgiveness and offering thanks to Him on their behalf, represented in the Holy Qur'ān as an exemplary behaviour of some of the prophets (*Surah Ibrāhīm*; 14: 41; *Surah al-Naml*, 27: 19; *Surah Nūh*, 71: 28) and of wise and good men (*Surah Luqmān*; 31:14; *Surah al-Aḥqāf*; 46: 15). Furthermore, it is confirmed by the Ḥadīth that *'If a person dies, his deeds are cut off, except for three; continuous charitable deeds, knowledge left behind from which people benefit, or a pious child who would pray for him'*⁴⁷. The Prophet's saying, 'a pious child', indicates that to expect his children to pray for him after his death, a person should have done his duty towards them during his lifetime. This can further be deduced from verse 17:24: *'And say: My Lord, be merciful to them as they have brought me up in my childhood'*, indicating the parent's duty and care towards the children at their tender ages and after, towards which the children are asked to pray to Allah Almighty for their parents reciprocally⁴⁸. The author has argued above that verse 31:13 is such that taking care to raise one's children and nurturing them to believe in the existence of Allah Almighty is a token of wisdom. This can be by educating them, but most importantly, by practicing religious values and beliefs through everyday interactions with others, including them⁴⁹. Research has

demonstrated that parental religiousness is associated with higher levels of desirable outcomes in children and lower levels of undesirable outcomes. Compared with children reared in non-religious households, children in religious homes have been reported to be better adjusted socially and emotionally, have higher self-esteem and practice more social responsibility⁵⁰. Such a child is more likely to remember their parents after their demise, pray for them and donate to charity on their behalf.

Notes and References

¹ Sayyid Qutb, *In The Shades of the Qur'ān* (no publisher), 13/331; Sophia Farooq, "The Significance of Parents in Islam" *Islamic City* (<https://www.islamicity.org/82136/the-significance-of-parents-in-islam-a-sacred-bond-in-todays-society/>) February 2023.

² Muhammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Damascus: Dār ibn Kathīr, 2002), Hadīth no. 527.

³ Cf. Ade Hidayat, "The Value Inheritance of Family Systems in Islamic Tradition: *Birr-ul-Walidayn*" *Ulum Islamiyyah* (ISSN 1675 – 5936 | E-ISSN 2289 - 4799) 2017, Vol. 22, p. 23-4.

⁴ Hidayat, "The Value" 22; Mirza Mahbub Wijaya, "Islamic Philosophy Perspective On *Birr Al-Walidain*" *Living Islam* (ISSN 2621-6582 (p); 2621-6590 (e)) Volume 5 Nomor 2, November 2022, p.174.

⁵ All Qur'ān translation is borrowed from Mufti Muhammad Usmani, *The Meaning of the Noble Qur'ān* (Karachi: Maktabat Ma'arifur Qur'ān, 2010).

⁶ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Hadīth no. 5976.

⁷ Hidayat, "The Value" 26.

⁸ Cf. Ahmad b. al-Ṣidīq al-Ghamārī, *Kitāb Birru 'l-Wālidayn al-Musammā Maṭāli' al-Budūr* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, 2006), 5.

⁹ Ahmad ibn 'Alī ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī bi Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. Muhammad Fu'ād 'Abd 'l-Bāqī (al-Maktaba al-Salafiya, n.p., n.d.), 11/229.

¹⁰ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, pp. 1598-1634.

¹¹ Muhammad ibn al-Walīd al-Ṭartūshī, *Birr al-Wālidayn* (Yemen: no specification, 2019), 50-52.

¹² Ahmad Shawqī Ibrāhīm, *Birr al-Wālidayn* (Egypt: Dār Nahḍat Miṣr, 2012), 27.

¹³ Muhammad Ṣāliḥ al-Munjid, *Aḥkām Birr al-Wālidayn* (Riyadh: Mujaṃma'at Zād li'l-Nashr, 2018), 65-6.

¹⁴ Ibrāhīm, *Birr*, 27.

¹⁵ Ṭartūshī, *Birr*, 17.

¹⁶ Cf. Ghamārī, *Maṭāli' al-Budūr*, 7- 8; Hidayat, "The Value" 23-4; Munjid, *Aḥkām*, 15; Sa'īd 'Alī Qaḥṭānī, *Birr al-Wālidayn fī Ḍū' al-Kitāb wa 'l-Sunna* (Riyadh: Mu'asasat al-Jirīsī, n.d.), 9; Ibrāhīm, *Birr*, 8; Ṭartūshī, *Birr*, 23-25.

¹⁷ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Hadīths no. 3004, 5970; Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj ibn Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Hadīth no. 2549

¹⁸ Al-Munjid, *Aḥkām*, 47-9;

¹⁹ Wael B. Hallaq, *Sharī'a Theory, Practice, Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 282.

²⁰ Al-Munjid, *Aḥkām*, 50-2.

²¹ Cf. Hidayat, "The Value" 25.

- ²²Cf. Joseph Lumbard, "the Semantic of Gratitude in the Qur'ān" Brill's *Journal of Islamic Ethics*, 5 (2021), 173–193; esp. 178-9, 187.
- ²³Afroz Ahmad Bisati, "Parenting is Counselling: The Relationship of the Parent-Child in Islam." *Hamdard Islamicus*, volume XLIV, 2 (2021) 69.
- ²⁴Muhammad Abdu 'l-Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'ān* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 187-205.
- ²⁵Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Ḥadīth no 5971; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Ḥadīth no 2548.
- ²⁶ Cf. Hidayat, "The Value" 22-3.
- ²⁷Abbās Hasan, *al-Naḥw al-Wafī*, (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, n.d.) sixth edition 3/556-8.
- ²⁸Hasan, *al-Naḥw*, 3/573, 576.
- ²⁹ Wijaya, "Islamic Philosophy" 175.
- ³⁰ Wijaya, "Islamic Philosophy" 177.
- ³¹A. F. L. Beeston, *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 230-1; 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Muasasat al-Risāla, 2008), 34, 35.
- ³²Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Ḥadīth 50.
- ³³ Cf. Qutb, *Shades*, 11/119.
- ³⁴Ismā'īl ibn Kathīr, *Mukhtaṣar Taḥṣīr Ibn Kathīr*, ed. M. 'A. Ṣābūnī (Beirut: Dar al-Qur'ān al-Karīm, 1981), 2/373.
- ³⁵Ibrāhīm, *Birr*, 12.
- ³⁶ Muhammad Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Taḥṣīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī*. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr li'l-Ṭibā'ah wa'l-Nashr, 1981), 20/189.
- ³⁷ Qutb, *Shades*, 11/119-20.
- ³⁸ Wijaya, "Islamic Philosophy" 175.
- ³⁹ Hidayat, "The Value" 26.
- ⁴⁰ Al-Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, 35.
- ⁴¹ Abū Ja'far Muhammad al-Ṭabarī, *Taḥṣīr al-Ṭabarī* (Beirut: Mu'ssast al-Risālah 1994), 1/484-6; Ibn Kathīr, *Mukhtaṣar*, 1/157; Qutb, *Shades*, 1/198.
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- ⁴³ The Old Testament, Genesis, chapters. 29-30, 35/16-20.
- ⁴⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taḥṣīr*, 4/390; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi'*, 11/454; al-Rāzī, *Taḥṣīr*, 18/214; Ibn Kathir, *Mukhtaṣar*, 2/262.
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