

Sūrat al-Baqarah Verse 246 – Part 2

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى الْمَلِكِ مِنْ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ مِنْ بَعْدِ مُوسَىٰ إِذْ قَالَوا لِنَبِيِّ لَهُمْ اأَبْعَثْ لَنَا مَلِكًا نُقَاتِلْ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ ۗ قَالَ هَلْ عَسَيْتُمْ إِن كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الْقِتَالُ أَلَّا تُقَاتِلُوا ۗ قَالُوا وَمَا لَنَا أَلَّا نُقَاتِلَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَقَدْ أُخْرِجْنَا مِنْ دِيَارِنَا وَأَبْنَائِنَا ۗ فَلَمَّا كُتِبَ عَلَيْهِمُ الْقِتَالُ تَوَلَّوْا إِلَّا قَلِيلًا مِّنْهُمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِالظَّالِمِينَ

2:246 *Have you not considered the chiefs of the children of Israel after Musa, when they said to their Prophet, 'Appoint for us a king that we may fight in the way of Allah.' He said, 'May it not be that you will not fight if fighting were prescribed for you?' They said, 'Why should we not fight in the way of Allah, when we have been expelled from our homes and separated from our children?' But when fighting was prescribed for them, they turned back except a few of them, and Allah knows well the wrongdoers.*

Note: The second part discusses the following part of the verse only:

They said, 'Why should we not fight in the way of Allah, when we have been expelled from our homes and separated from our children?' But when fighting was prescribed for them, they turned back except a few of them, and Allah knows well the wrongdoers.

Questions for Reflection

- 1) What emotions made the Banu Israel confident that they would fight in the way of Allah?
- 2) Why do human beings not carry out what they say they will do? What makes them change?
- 3) Allah says these people were 'zālimīn'. Who did they wrong?

Commentary

When the Banu Israel were asked by their Prophet if they would be ready to fight if he appointed a king for them, they replied in the affirmative. They pledged their willingness to fight for their rights. Their independence, their dignity and their livelihood had all been taken away from them. They were suffering because of the enemies and they were adamant that they would fight to restore their dignity.

According to Hadith, their Prophet did not believe that they would actually fight. He asked them 'You have no sense of loyalty to God's cause or a desire to fight in His way'.

According to hadith they replied 'if God prescribes fighting for us, we will obey our Lord and fight our enemies'. (*Bihār al-Anwar* v.13, p.450 – quoted from the book *God's Emissaries*)

The word 'ma' in the answer of the Banu Israel could be interpreted in two ways
- as a question; why we would not fight . . .

- as a negation; it is not possible that we would not fight . . .

The people conveyed their feelings that although generally warfare would not be liked, that would not be the case when they have been forced to leave their lands and some were taken as prisoners. They were separated from their families. If all was well their option would not be war. Under such circumstances however, they did not have a choice.

But when the Prophet appointed Tālūt as their king and they accepted him after their initial reluctance, his command to lead the people against the Palestinians (known at that time as the Philistines) was disobeyed by most of them. The details of their test will be discussed in the next few verses. This verse just summarizes what happened after the Prophet accepted their request.

Some commentators say the number of people who stayed loyal to Tālūt was 313, the same number of the Muslims at Badr. It is also the number of people who will respond first to the call of Imam Al-Mahdi (a) when he reappears.

The verse shows that difficulties sometimes trigger movement and a desire for change. The people were unhappy with their circumstances and resented their losses. This made them ready to act, although not all of them were committed enough to follow through with it. It is easy to be moved to demand action but being determined to follow up with the action and bear the hardship that may come with it, requires strength of character. Many people give up along the way. This is a test that sieves out the strong from the weak, those who mean what they say from those who just speak out of emotion.

Those who break their pledges and do not follow their speech with actions are termed as wrongdoers at the end of this verse. Allah knows who they are. The appearance of wanting to act does not fool Him. He can see through them. This false pretense wrongs the souls of the individuals themselves as well as their community.

Connecting verse

- 1) Hypocrites during the time of the Prophet (s) who refused to fight – 33:13
- 2) How people's emotions (and actions) change according to circumstances – 33:18-19

Historical Connection

- 1) The people of Kūfa (refusal to act on their letters to Imam al-Husayn)

The story of how the people of Kūfa wrote so many letters to the Imam inviting him to come and they would support him is well documented. They turned back on their promises except a few of them. These few were part of the group of companions who sacrificed their lives on the Day of Ashura.

For details check:

<http://www.shiavault.com/books/the-hidden-truth-about-karbala/chapters/22-chapter-17-imam-husayn-s-migration-from-mecca> <https://www.al-islam.org/life-imam-husayn-research-and-analysis-baqir-shareef-al-qurashi/cheap-view#delegation-kufa>