

Surah 2. Al-Baqara

Asad: AND LO! Moses said unto his people: "Behold, God bids you to sacrifice a cow."⁵³ They said: "Dost thou mock at us?" He answered: "I seek refuge with God against being so ignorant!"⁵⁴

Malik: Remember the incident when Musa (Moses) said to his people: "Allah commands you to sacrifice a cow," they replied, "do you ridicule us?" Musa answered, "I seek the protection of Allah from being one of the ignorant."

Mustafa Khattab:

And ?remember? when Moses said to his people, "Allah commands you to sacrifice a cow."¹ They replied, "Are you mocking us?" Moses responded, "I seek refuge in Allah from acting foolishly!"

Pickthall: And when Moses said unto his people: Lo! Allah commandeth you that ye sacrifice a cow, they said: Dost thou make game of us? He answered: Allah forbid that I should be among the foolish!

Yusuf Ali: And remember Moses said to his people: "Allah commands that ye sacrifice a heifer." They said: "Makest thou a laughing-stock of us?" He said: "Allah save me from being an ignorant (fool)!"⁸⁰

Transliteration: Waith qala moosa liqawmihi inna Allaha yamurukum an tathbahoo baqaratan qaloo atattakhithuna huzuwan qala aAoothu biAllahi an akoona mina aljahileena

Author Comments

53 - As is evident from verse {72}, the story related in this and the subsequent passages almost certainly refers to the Mosaic law which ordains that in certain cases of unresolved murder a cow should be sacrificed, and the elders of the town or village nearest to the place of the murder should wash their hands over it and declare, "Our hands have not shed this blood, neither have our eyes seen it" - whereupon the community would be absolved of collective responsibility. For the details of this Old Testament ordinance, see Deuteronomy xxi, 1-9.

54 - Lit., "lest I be one of the ignorant". The imputation of mockery was obviously due to the fact that Moses promulgated the above ordinance in very general terms, without specifying any details.

This sūrah is named after the cow in this story, which happened at the time of Moses (?). A rich man was killed by his nephew, his only heir, and the body was thrown at the door of an innocent man. After a long investigation, no one was identified as the killer. Moses (?) prayed for guidance and was told that the only way to find the killer was to sacrifice a cow and strike the victim with a piece of it. When this was done, the victim spoke miraculously and said who the killer was.

80 - This story or parable of the heifer in ii. 67-71 should be read with the parable of the dead man brought to life in ii. 72-73. The stories were accepted in Jewish traditions, which are themselves based on certain sacrificial directions in the Old Testament. The heifer story of Jewish tradition is based on Num. xix. 1-10, in which Moses and Aaron ordered the Israelites to sacrifice a red heifer without spot or blemish; her body was to be burnt and the ashes were to be kept for the purification of the congregation from sin. The parable of the dead man we shall refer to later. The lesson of the heifer parable is plain. Moses announced the sacrifice to the Israelites, and they treated it as a jest. When Moses continued solemnly to ask for the sacrifice, they put him off on one pretext and another, asking a number of questions which they could have answered themselves if they had listened to Moses's directions. Their questions were carping criticisms rather than the result of a desire for information. It was a mere thin pretence that they were genuinely seeking for guidance. When at last they were driven into a corner, they made the sacrifice, but the will was wanting, which would have made the sacrifice efficacious for purification from sin. The real reason for their prevarications was their guilty conscience, as we see in the parable of the dead man (ii. 72-73).

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