

Surah 2. Al-Baqara

Asad: [Moses] answered: "Behold, He says it is to be a cow not broken-in to plough the earth or to water the crops, free of fault, without markings of any other colour." Said they: "At last thou hast brought out the truth!" - and thereupon they sacrificed her, although they had almost left it undone.⁵⁵

Malik: Musa replied: "Allah says, the said cow should have neither been used to till the soil nor water the fields; a healthy one free from any blemish." "Now you have brought us the accurate description," they said. Then they slaughtered her, after they had nearly declined.

Mustafa Khattab:

He replied, "Allah says, 'It should have been used neither to till the soil nor water the fields; wholesome and without blemish.'" They said, "Now you have come with the truth." Yet they still slaughtered it hesitantly!

Pickthall: (Moses) answered: Lo! He saith: Verily she is a cow unyoked; she plougheth not the soil nor watereth the tilth; whole and without mark. They said: Now thou bringest the truth. So they sacrificed her, though almost they did not.

Yusuf Ali: He said: "He says a heifer not trained to till the soil or water the fields; sound and without blemish." They said: "Now hast thou brought the truth." Then they offered her in sacrifice but not with good-will.

Transliteration: Qala innahu yaqoolu innaha baqaratun la thaloolun tutheeru alarda wala tasqee alhartha musallamatun la shiyata feeha qaloo alana jita bialhaqqi fathabahooha wama kadoo yafAAaloon

Author Comments

55 - I.e., their obstinate desire to obtain closer and closer definitions of the simple commandment revealed to them through Moses had made it almost impossible for them to fulfil it. In his commentary on this passage, Tabari quotes the following remark of Ibn 'Abbas: "If [in the first instance] they had sacrificed any cow chosen by themselves, they would have fulfilled their duty; but they made it complicated for themselves, and so God made it complicated for them." A similar view has been expressed, in the same context, by Zamakhshari. It would appear that the moral of this story points to an important problem of all (and, therefore, also of Islamic) religious jurisprudence: namely, the inadvisability of trying to elicit additional details in respect of any religious law that had originally been given in general terms - for, the more numerous and multiform such details become, the more complicated and rigid becomes the law. This point has been acutely grasped by Rashid Rida', who says in his commentary on the above Qur'anic passage (see Manar I, 345 f.): "Its lesson is that one should not pursue one's [legal] inquiries in such a way as to make laws more complicated.... This was how the early generations [of Muslims] visualized the problem. They did not make things complicated for themselves - and so, for them, the religious law (din) was natural, simple and liberal in its straightforwardness. But those who came later added to it [certain other] injunctions which they had deduced by means of their own reasoning (ijtihad); and they multiplied those [additional] injunctions to such an extent that the religious law became a heavy burden on the community." For the sociological reason why the genuine ordinances of Islamic Law - that is, those which have been prima facie laid down as such in the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet - are almost always devoid of details, I would refer the reader to my book State and Government in Islam (pp. 11 ff. and

passim). The importance of this problem, illustrated in the above story of the cow - and correctly grasped by the Prophet's Companions - explains why this surah has been entitled "The Cow". (See also [5:101](#) and the corresponding notes [120-123].)

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