

Abū Bakr's Befitting Response to a Pagan or an Insult to Another's Religion?

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Abstract

Critics of Islam often bring up issues that seem to be controversial without providing the proper context for the situation or how such a situation would have been viewed in light of Arab society at the time of the Prophet – peace be upon him. This leads to false information being spread and misleading impressions being given. One such issue is with the wording of a response that the Companion Abū Bakr to one of the pagans. These critics claim that Abū Bakr was unnecessarily insulting and insensitive to the other's religion. This article will examine the context of this incident and explain how Abū Bakr's statement would have been viewed by the Arabs during that particular time period.

1. Introduction

Some critics of Islam took issue with the reply by the Prophet's Companion Abū Bakr – may Allāh bless them both – to 'Urwah ibn Mas'ūd when he represented the pagans on the eve of Truce of Ḥudaybiyyah. They claim that he used indecent words and he was being offensive to another religious belief system. Members of the Ahmadiyya group use this incident to defend Mirza Ghulām Ahmad's bluntly obscene language against his opponents. Therefore, it is important to see the true significance of Abū Bakr's words in light of its context and usage among the Arabs. The specific words he used

are literally translated as, “Go suck the clitoris of al-Lāt!”¹

2. The context

In the sixth year after the Hijrah, the Prophet – peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him – along with about 1,400 Companions left for Makkah to perform pilgrimage (‘umrah) to the blessed Ka‘bah. The Muslims traveled close to Makkah and camped at a place called Ḥudaybiyyah. While the Muslims camped there, a series of events took place and a number of emissaries of the people of Makkah came to the noble Prophet. ‘Urwah ibn Mas'ūd was one of these emissaries and he came assuming that the Prophet had actually come to Makkah to fight. He said:

O Muḥammad! Won't you feel any scruple in extirpating your relations? Have you ever heard of anyone amongst the Arabs extirpating his relatives before you? On the other hand, if the reverse should happen, [nobody will aid you, for] by Allāh, I do not see [with you] dignified people, but people from various tribes who would run away leaving you alone.

Hearing this Abū Bakr – may Allāh be pleased with him – could not hold himself and said:

امصص يبظر اللات، أنحن نفر عنه وندعه؟

Muhsin Khan (whose translation of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* is most widely used) renders it as:

¹ at-Ṭabarī, *The History of Al-Ṭabarī: The Victory of Islam*, Vol. 8, 76

Abu Bakr abused him and said, 'Do you say we would run and leave the Prophet alone?'²

Aisha Bewley phrases it as:

Suck al-Lat's nipples! Would we flee from him and desert him!³

Alfred Guillaume has also rendered it similarly in his translation of *Sīrat Ibn Ishāq*:

Suck al-Lat's nipples! Should we desert him?⁴

Others who translated it literally have put it somewhat differently.

Michael Fishbein in his translation of the relevant section of *The History of Al-Tabari* states it as:

Go suck the clitoris of al-Lat! Would we flee and leave him?⁵

3. The point explained

Critics assert that the first part of Abū Bakr's reply was actually an insult to the religion of 'Urwah. David Wood states that this was a response to a rather "reasonable comment" of 'Urwah.

Before looking at the implication of 'Urwah's words and their merit to become a trigger for Abū Bakr's response, let's first produce a literary analysis of Abū Bakr's words.

² al-Bukhārī, *The Translation of the Meanings of Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Book 50, Hadīth 891

³ al-Bukhārī, *The Ṣaḥīḥ Collection of al-Bukhari*, Chapter 59, Section XV, Hadīth 2581

⁴ Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 502

In Ibn Hishām's edition of *Sīrat Ibn Ishāq*, the original wording for the second part of the sentence is slightly different.

⁵ aṭ-Ṭabarī, *The History of Al-Tabari: The Victory of Islam*, Vol. 8, 76

3.1 A proverb

The words that literally mean 'suck the clitoris of so and so' are actually a proverb. In his *Arabic-English Lexicon*, Edward William Lane writes:

(أمصص بظر فلانة): a prov. of the Arabs.⁶

Al-'Aynī (d. 855 A.H.) writes:

وقال ابن التين: هي كلمة تقولها العرب عند الذم والمشاتمة، لكن تقول: بظر أمه، واستعار أبو بكر، رضي الله تعالى عنه، ذلك في اللات لتعظيمهم إياها

And Ibn at-Tīn said: This is the phrase Arabs use for condemnation and vilification, but they say: 'Clitoris of his mother.' And Abū Bakr used it with reference to al-Lāt due to their [i.e. the pagans'] respect for her.⁷

We shall see the shift from the regular use of the idiom in the contextual explanation and a related example in the following lines.

3.2 Contextual explanation: what triggered this response?

It might be too easy for David Wood to see 'Urwah's remarks that invited this response as "reasonable," but a diligent student of history would have no choice but to strongly differ with him. On this point, one needs to put oneself in the boots of Abū Bakr before making an assessment. To be true it is not even for Muslims of this day to be in that state.

The Muslims left Madinah without any intention or preparation for war. However, the pagans of Makkah decided not to let the Muslims enter the city and venerate the blessed

⁶ Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, Book 1, 222

⁷ al-'Aynī, *Umdat al-Qārī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Vol. 14, 10

Ka'bah. When the Muslims set out on the journey, they got disturbing news about the plans of the Quraysh of Makkah. It was for this reason that the Prophet had to take an unconventional route to ensure that he could reach the holy precincts of Makkah and ensue with the rituals; thus clearing up the situation to the Quraysh and allowing them to do away with their unneeded apprehensions.⁸

Yet the pagans were not ready to give the Muslims an easy passage to the holy sanctuary; being unarmed, the Muslims were in a quite vulnerable situation. The severity of the situation can further be known by the fact that later when some incidents led to the pledge under the tree (Bayt ar-Riḍwān), the attendees were promised abundant reward and blessings. This was only proportional to the danger the Muslims were then exposed to in that particular condition of being unarmed and unprotected in a hostile territory.

Basing his argument on a baseless assumption of the Muslims coming to Makkah with hostile designs, 'Urwah actually threatened the Muslims. He did not just stop at that; he even went on to attribute cowardice and infidelity to the Prophet's Companions. This was more than just a mere comment. It was an attempt to make the Prophet feel skeptical of his Companions. Therefore, it was natural for the Companions to take strong exception to these statements and respond with strong words. Qur'an 8:15-16 terms fleeing from an encounter a major sin. Furthermore, deserting a prophet was more than just a sin. Thus, any suggestion to it was a direct attack against the noble Companions of the Prophet – may the peace and blessings of Allāh be upon them all.

With this context, it is easy to understand why Abū Bakr verbally lashed out at 'Urwah, using

the name of the pagans' deity. He was actually telling him that a believer in a pagan deity should have never have misgivings about the faithful companions of the Prophet whose conviction rested on the belief in the All-Powerful One True God.

With reference to a classical scholar, Ibn Hajar points to the rhetorical significance of these words:

وقال بن المنير في قول أبي بكر تحسيس للعدو
وتكذيبهم وتعريض بالزامهم من قولهم إن اللات
بنت الله تعالى الله عن ذلك علوا كبيرا بأنها لو
كانت بنتا لكان لها ما يكون للإناث

Ibn al-Munīr said, 'In the words of Abū Bakr, there are condemnation and rejection of the adversaries and a response to their allegation that al-Lāt is the daughter of Allāh – Allāh is exalted above this – for if it were a daughter [of Allāh], it would have what the females do.'⁹

4. More on the usage of these words

With reference to Lane's *Arabic-English Lexicon*, we have seen that the words used are actually a proverb of the Arabs used for condemnation and expressing one's strong reaction.

Here are a couple of examples that help us understand the true sense of these words.

Ibn 'Abd Rabbih (d. 328 A.H.) writes:

ومن أعزّ الناس نفسا وأشرفهم همما: الأنصار، وهم
الأوس والخزرج ابنا قبيلة، لم يؤدّوا إتاوة قطّ في
الجاهلية إلى أحد من الملوك، وكتب إليهم تبع

⁸ Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 500-501

⁹ Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī*, Vol. 5, 340

يدعوهم إلى طاعته ويتوعدّهم إن لم يفعلوا؛ فكتبوا

إليه:

العبد تبعكم يروم قتالنا ... ومكانه بالمنزل المتدلل
إنّا أناس لا ينام بأرضنا ... عض الرسول ببظر أم
المرسل

فغزاهم تبع أبو كرب، فكانوا يقاتلونه نهاراً ويخرجون
إليه القرى ليلاً، فتدمّم من قتالهم ورحل عنهم.

The Anṣār were among the most high-spirited and honorable people, and they were descendants of Aws and Khazraj, the sons of Qaylah. They never paid tribute to any king during the period of ignorance [before Islam]. [King] Tubba' wrote to them, calling upon them to obey him and threatening them if they did not. They wrote back to him:

How eagerly the slave, Tubba', yearns to fight us!

Yet his place is ever a home of ignominy.
We are a people in whose land no [enemy] dares sleep.

May the messenger bite the clitoris of the sender's mother.

So Tubba' Abū Karib attacked them, and they used to fight him by day and send him a guest's meal by night. He finally got weary of fighting them and left.¹⁰

This is a good parallel to what is at hand. The context is almost the same as related to sovereignty and chivalry. When an Arab's chivalry is put to doubt by someone, he lashes out with these words at the one who does it.

Also note another point of comparison: the messenger of King Tubba' asked the Anṣār to subdue to an alien authority so they used the proverb making the mother of the sender the object, "*May the messenger bite the clitoris of*

the sender's mother." Likewise, when 'Urwah attacked the belief of the Companions by making an attempt to cast aspersions on their fidelity to the Prophet and chivalry at a certain stage in the long religious conflict, Abū Bakr responded by bringing in his deity for whose sake he and his people were troubling the Muslims.

In fact, the proverbial phrase is not meant as an extremely offensive abuse. It is just a way to strongly condemn or point out the worthlessness of something. Consider the following line by renowned classical Arabic literary critic Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī (d. 463 A.H.):

إن الشعراء ثلاثة: شاعر، وشويعر، و ماص بظر أمه

Literally, it would be translated as:

Verily, the poets are of three categories: an excellent poet, an ordinary poet and the one who bites the clitoris of his mother.¹¹

The meaning however is that the third category is of third-class poets who produce absolute rubbish in literary terms. This is the ultimate proof that the original sense of the words is neither abuse nor obscene yelling but it is an expression used for forceful condemnation.

'Amr ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255 A.H.), referring to this narration and a few more, says:

وإنما وُضعت هذه الألفاظ ليستعملها أهل اللغة، ولو كان الرأي ألاّ يُلفظ بما كان لأوّل كونها معنيّ، ولكان في التّحريم والصّون لُغة العرب أن تُرفع هذه الأسماء والألفاظ منها.

وقد أصاب كلّ الصّواب من قال: "لكلّ مقامٍ مقال"

¹⁰ Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, *The Unique Necklace: Al-'Iqd al-Farid*, Vol. 2, 54

¹¹ Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī, *al-'Umdah fī Maḥāsin ash-Shi'r wa 'Ādābih*, Vol. 1, 116

*These words were created to be used by all Arabic-speaking people, and to hold that they ought never to be uttered would be to make nonsense of their creation; in that case, it would be more logical and better for the purity of the Arabic language if these words were to be withdrawn from it. Verily, he uttered the total truth who said, 'Every single audience and situation has a different talk to it.'*¹²

This indeed is the truth; every audience has a talk to it! In the given situation, Abū Bakr – may Allāh be pleased with him – was absolutely justified in using the words we have shown with reference to Arabic literature to be nothing but a tool for expressing forceful reproof. ‘Urwah, at that time a pagan, asked for it and Abū Bakr just gave the befitting response.

5. Summary and Conclusion

1- It was ‘Urwah who first hurt the religious feelings of Abū Bakr and the other Muslims. Therefore, anyone learning of the incident makes no sense to object to Abū Bakr who represented Muslims in this reaction.

2- Abū Bakr used the template of a well-known Arabic proverb, which was used for condemnation in different contexts.

When used in general description or ordinary personal disputes, it was related to the addressee’s mother (cf. Ibn Rashīq).

For instance, the people of Madinah used it when speaking about a messenger of one who wanted them to submit to his authority, so they made a reference to the sender’s mother (cf. Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih).

When used in a religious context to respond to an attack by a believer in gods and goddesses, a goddess became the object of the scorn invited by one of its devotees. This scorn even had rhetoric against the false belief.

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¹² al-Jāḥiẓ, *Rasā’il al-Jāḥiẓ*, Vol. 2, 93