

“**S**ould your wife sharply, bully and terrify her” is a direct quotation from a 15th century church publication called *Rules of Marriage*, a document which does not just condone wife battery but actually recommends it as a meritorious action that will bring spiritual benefit to both husband and wife, to the batterer and battered alike. Just one example of the many religious texts that speak about wife battery as a legitimate and acceptable act.

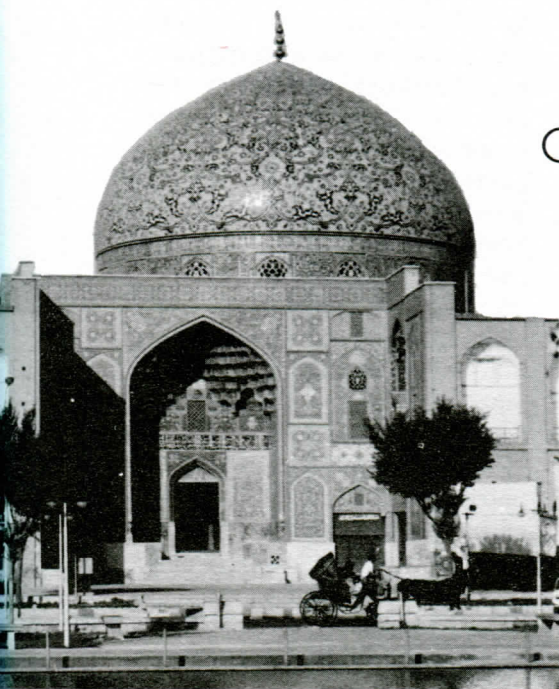
In Islam, the discussion around wife battery is linked with a particular verse, the *Surah an-Nisa* (the Surah of the Women) from the Koran. In the 34th verse (*ayah*) of Surah 4, it says (from the translation by Yusuf Ali):

“Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband’s) absence what Allah would have them guard.

*As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill conduct, admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds, (and last) **beat them** (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance): for Allah is most high, great (above you all).”*

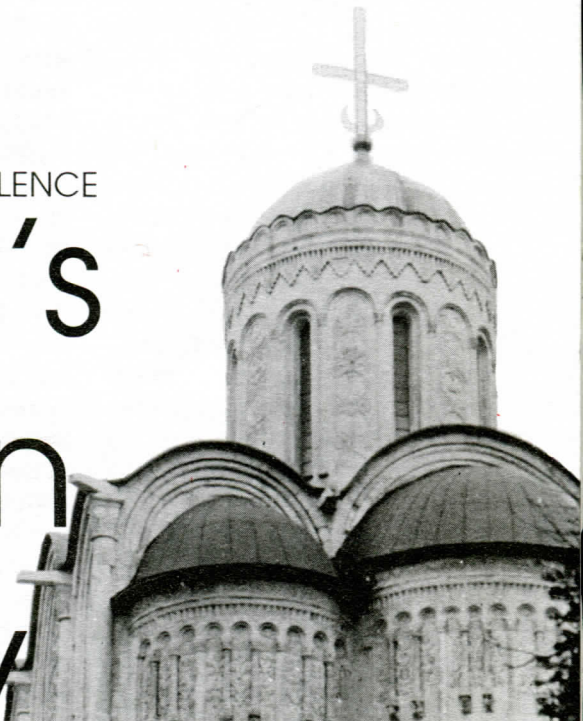
Muslims believe that the Koran is the literal word of God, a copy of the *Oemn al-Kitab*, the book that is with God in heaven. The text in its Arabic form is considered holy. Nevertheless, Muslims do hold that revelations, especially those that state guidelines for conduct, were revealed to Muhammad after particular situations occurred or when cases or problems had been brought before him. In order, therefore, to interpret the passage correctly, it is important to know which event had caused the revelation to come down. Muslim scholars called this the ‘*asbab an-nuzuli*,’ knowledge of the inducement of the revelations.

Surah 4:34 was revealed as the Prophet responded to an incident of wife battery brought to



ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

God's Own Say





The early church fathers lavishly elaborated on Eve's deception. "Do you know that each of you is an Eve; the sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age; the guilt must necessarily live too; you are the devil's gateway."

him. Mernissis's source is the *Tafsir* (a commentary on the Koran) of the famous and esteemed Islamic scholar at-Tabari who died in 922 CE.

During a violent dispute, an Ansari man slapped his wife. The injured woman hurried to the Prophet and demanded that he, as *hakam* (that is, arbiter in the legal sense), apply the law of retaliation and that he take action on the spot. Muhammad was preparing to make his decision to fulfill her request when the verse was revealed. God had decided otherwise. Muhammad realised that as an individual he could be in conflict with God. So the Prophet summoned the husband, recited the verse, and told him: "I wanted one thing, and God wanted another."

The context is clear: An incident of wife battery had taken place in Medina. The woman involved went to the Prophet to demand justice and despite the Prophet's own inclination to give her rights and straighten the husband out, a verse was revealed that in certain situations beating was allowed. And the conclusion of Muhammad is: Sometimes I want one thing and God wants another.

In the *Surah 4*, the word *daraba* is used. What does it mean? Yusuf Ali translates it to mean *to beat* but qualifies it by adding the word *lightly* in brackets even though the Arabic text does not have such qualification. Pickthall translates it as *to scourge* and Elizabeth Fernea and Basima Bezirgan, while agreeing with that meaning, say the actual severity of the blow varies according to the context in which *daraba* is meted.

It is important to note that the Prophet as a person seemed to have rejected wife battery. But although the *Sunnah* (the sayings and customs) of the Prophet is highly regarded in the Islamic tra-

dition and functions as a major source of Islamic law, yet the Koran itself, the Holy Book that was sent directly from God, is regarded as the primary source of *Shari-ah*. In the case, therefore, where there is a contradiction between the sayings and customs of the Prophet as recorded in the *hadiths* and the Koran, the text of the Koran prevails in all cases.

The text of *Surah 4:34* has two crucial terms that we need to look at. First is the Arabic word for that which triggers beating, '*nushuz.*' Yusuf Ali translates it as *disloyalty and ill conduct* in v.34, whereas later in the same *Surah* in v.128, he translates it as *cruelty*.

Let us focus on secondary causes within Christianity that have led to the legitimacy and condonation of wife battery and other forms of violence against women.

Patriarchy is a social system which supports and authenticates the predominance of men, brings about a concentration of power and privilege in the hands of men, and, consequently, leads to the control and subordination of women generating social inequality between the sexes. The Bible was written within a strong patriarchal culture in which women were considered to be the possessions of men rather than their partners. The Ten Commandments prove the point. In the Tenth Commandment ("Do not covet...") in the book of Exodus, Ch. 20, v.17, "your neighbour's wife" is mentioned alongside his houses, oxen, donkeys, and all other items that *belong* to him and which another man must not take.

Influence was exercised by the patriarchal Roman culture on the emerging Christian church. In Roman culture, the *pater familias* had total power over all members of his household, including power over life and death. These Roman



It is said that a battered woman once demanded justice. But despite Muhammad's own inclination to straighten the husband out, he concluded that sometimes he wants one thing and God wants another.

patriarchal traditions influence the New Testament to some extent but more especially the canonical laws of the church. But while the Roman laws were reformed as time went by, the Church's canonical laws remained unchanged. It was the state and not the Church which in the 19th century took the lead in first minimising and later abolishing the right of husbands to chastise their wives.

In order to legitimatise the male authority over females, the same classical arguments were used as Riffat Hassan argues. Some verses from St. Paul's First Letter to Timothy, Ch.2, which speak about the attitude required of women in worship, sum it up:

"A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner." 1 Timothy, 2:11-14

Paul further asked wives to submit to their husbands as to the Lord. *"For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church... Now as the Church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything."* Ephesians 6:22-26.

The early church fathers lavishly elaborated on Eve's deception. Tertulian, a church father from the second century, wrote: *"Do you know that each of you is an Eve; the sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age; the guilt must necessarily live too; you are the devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of that tree; you are the first deserter of the Divine Law; you are she who persuaded him when the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image in man. On account of your desert, that is, death, even the*

Son of God had to die."

The logical step from this and similar types of verbal violence to actual physical violence is easy to see, especially in those cases where husbands considered their wives *'daughters of evil'* rather than daughters of Eve, *'scorpions ever ready to sting'* and *'instruments which the Devil uses to gain possession of the male souls,'* to quote from just a few more descriptions of woman that have flowed from the pens of church fathers.

Don't the Scriptures imply that physical violence against women is acceptable since the mother of all women, Eve, is punished with the pains of labour for her transgression? It says in the Book of Genesis 3:16: *"Because you have done this, I will greatly increase your pains in child-bearing; with pain will you give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you?"* And the reformer Martin Luther, said: *"If a woman grows weary and at last dies from child-bearing, it matters not. Let her only die from bearing. She is there to do it."*

In more recent times, theologians, both male and female, sought new ways of interpreting the texts. They have stressed the creation tradition of the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis. Genesis 1:27 says that: *"God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them,"* thus underlining that there was one act of creation which brought humanity, male and female, into being. Both were created in the image of God.

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