

# On the Mistranslation of Daraba in the Holy Quran

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## Abstract

Improper, or literal translations of the Quran may be one of the reasons behind misinterpretations of this sacred text. This paper deals with translations of one of the most controversial verses in the Quran, one that has brought about a great deal of misunderstanding about Islam and the status of women in this religion. It is verse 34 of Surah Annissae (the surah of Women). In this verse, according to many translators, God ordered men to beat their wives. In this paper, I will try to show that **beat**, **hit** or **strike** are just some of a hord of meanings that the root **drb** (from which the verb **daraba** is derived) has, and that it is not necessarily this meaning that the Holy Quran intends to convey in this surah.

**Keywords:** daraba, Quran, women, Verse34, surah annissae, Sunnah, Prophet, separate, mistranslations, meanings

## 1. Introduction

Since the first translation of the Holy Quran into English directly from Arabic by George Sale (Al Koran, 1734), there have appeared more than sixty other translations by Muslim and non-Muslim translators ( E.H. Palmer, 1880 ; J.M. Rodwell, 1876 ; Richard Bell, 1937; Arthur J. Arberry, 1955; M. Pickthall, 1930 ; Muhammad Assad, 1980 ;Sayed Hussain Nasr, 2015 ; Talal Itani, 2012 ;Ahmed Ali, 1988 ; Abdallah Yusuf Ali, 1934 ; Aicha Bewley, 2011 ; Laleh Bakhtiar, 2007 (the first woman translator of the H.Q. into English) ; N.J. Dawood, 1956 ; Abdelhaleem Muhammad, 2004, etc..).

But most of the above translations were literal ones which did not take into account the variety of meanings that a word might have. Since the object of this study is the translation of Surah 4:34 in The Holy Quran and more particularly the translation of *daraba* in this surah, I found out that the majority of the above-mentioned authors rendered the meaning of *daraba* with either *beat* (Shakir), *beat lightly* (Ahmed Ali), *hit* (M.A.S. Abdelhaleem), *scourge* (Pickthall) or *strike* (Abdullah Yusuf Ali).

Translating the Holy Quran into English poses many interpretational problems. Many English translations of the Quran have been widely criticised for their inability to capture the intended meaning (e.g. Ali, 1992 ;Alkhalwala, 2004 ;Ardekani, 2002 ;Shaki, 2000).

There is agreement among Muslim scholars that the Holy Quran cannot be transferred literally to another language (Ushama, 1995 : 130). This is due to several reasons :

- 1) Words of different languages do not express all the shades of meaning of their counterparts, though they may express specific concepts.
- 2) Narrowing down the meaning of the Holy Quran to specific concepts in foreign languages would mean missing out other important dimensions.
- 3) The presentation of the H.Q. in different languages would result in confusion and misguidance.

It is true that no literary masterpiece is ever fully translatable into another language, let alone the Holy Quran, a divine book revealed to the prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) and accepted as the last scripture for human guidance by Muslims.

This does not mean that the H.Q. should not be translated, though it loses much in tone

And nuance, let alone the incommunicable beauty, grandeur and grace of the original.

How could a text which, in the memorable words of A. J. Arberry (1964, cover page), is « neither prose nor poetry but a fusion of both » ever reveal its mysteries via translation in another language ?

But since the majority of Muslims in the world are non-Arabic speakers, it, indeed, makes it a necessity to deal with the Quran in many languages . Translators of sacred texts, however, tend to stick more closely to the original than translators of other types of composition (Devin J. Stewart, 2000 : 31-48). The result, in most cases, is a literal translation devoid of meaning where metaphoric expressions are sacrificed for the sake of reproducing the original syntax. As Omar Cheikh Alshabab (2003 : 21) states, «one of the reasons compelling translators for studying the Quran is the fact that each translation bears witness to the conscious and determined effort of the translator, which means that

there is no general consensus on which meanings of the Quran are closest or best, each one has his or her own reasons for preferring or rejecting a particular translation ».

In this paper, I will try to shed some light on some mistranslations made by some scholars while trying to render the meaning of the Quran into English, and I will put more emphasis on translations of the root *drb* in the Holy Quran. The corpora used in this paper are taken mainly from the Holy Quran and the Sunnah (Prophet's tradition).

## 2. A controversial verse

Verse 34 of surah annisa (women) had been targeted on many occasions. Of all the Quranic passages about men and women, it is, perhaps, the one most often misunderstood verse. In this verse, it is believed God allowed men to beat their wives in case of *نشوز* (disobedience), but neither the instrument to be used for the punishment (hand or something else) nor the part of the body to be beaten are mentioned in this verse, as will be noticed from its English translation :

«Men are (meant to be righteous and kind) guardians of women because God has favored some more than others and because they (men) spend out of their wealth. (In their turn), righteous women are (meant to be) devoted and to guard what God has (willed to be) guarded even though out of sight (of the husband). As for those you fear ill-will and nasty conduct, admonish them (first), next leave them alone in beds, and (last) beat or separate them from you. » (3 : 34)

In the Arabic language, generally, the verb *ضرب* is used for a slap on the face, and *ضرب* is used for a slap on the back-neck, and *ضرب* is used for a punch, whereas *ركل* is used for a kick. But nothing of this is specified in 4 :34.

We all know of cases where a simple slap on the face was enough to lead to blindness or a hard stroke on the head could lead to death. So, how could such violence be attributed to God in the absence of any evidence (precision)?

We notice that, in Verse 2 of Surah Annour (الأنور) which says : *الذين يفترون على الله وكلاما كان ممنوعا لهما فليضربوا* (flog adulterers 100 times) and also in Verse 4 « *الذين يفترون على الله وكلاما كان ممنوعا لهما فليضربوا* (those who accuse innocent women of adultery without bringing four witnesses, then flog them 80 flogs », the Quranic text didn't use **daraba** to denote physical punishment, it rather used **jalada** (lash, whip, flog). So, how could a text which is so specific (mentions even the number of whips) neglect specifying the kind of beating and the part to be beaten in 4 :34 if it were meant to be understood in the sense of **hit, beat or strike** ?

Let us compare this with Verse 41-44 In Surah Ayyub (38) : « And take in your hand a bundle of thin grass and strike therewith your wife and break not your oath. »

So, here, we can see how Prophet Ayyub was informed about how to resolve the dilemma in which he was because of the oath he made when he was sick to punish his wife upon recovery. The Quranic text instructs Ayyub to satisfy his oath by hitting his wife with a handful of fragrant grass. The objective was to satisfy the promise without harming the wife. Here, the Quranic text has specified the tool for the 'punishment' which is not the case in 4 :34.

If verse 4 :34 is singled out by some to be the most controversial verse in the Quran, it is, I believe, partly due to mistranslations and partly due to the neglect of sunna (prophet's tradition) in interpretation and also because of the myriad of meanings that the root **drb** might invoke.

## 3. Daraba : a multi-meaning word

In the Quran Dictionary (on line), it is mentioned that the root **drb** occurs 58 times in the Quran, 55 times as verb and 3 times as noun. And among the meanings of the verb **daraba**, we find **travel, set forth, go forth, put forth, cast, present, set up, take away, put up, leave**, etc..

Verbal idioms are a significant component of the Quranic vocabulary ; they occur quite frequently, so that clusters of verbal idioms are sometimes found within the span of a short passage.

The verb *daraba* derived from the root (*drb*) is probably one of the most diversely used idiomatic verbs, not only in the Quran, but also in the Arabic language, including Moroccan Arabic (B.Qorch, 2011). This verb is often used figuratively ; it is rarely used with the meaning of beat or strike except when the instrument that served the beating or the part of the body (or thing) to be beaten are mentioned, as is the case in the following verses :

(12 *يُضْرَبُونَ* "27 *يُضْرَبُونَ* *أَصَابِعَهُمْ* *فِي* *الْأَعْنَاقِ* (cut off their necks and their finger-tips)

(27 *يُضْرَبُونَ* *أَصَابِعَهُمْ* *فِي* *الْأَعْنَاقِ*) (They slap their faces)

(160 *يَضْرِبُ* *بِالسَّيِّدِ* *الْحِجَابَ* *وَأَنفُسَهُمْ* *فِي* *الْأَعْنَاقِ* " (Strike the rock with your stick)

(73 *يَضْرِبُونَ* *بِأَعْيُنِنَا* *مِنْ* *أَحْسَنِ* *أَعْيُنِنَا* *مِنْ* *أَحْسَنِ* *أَعْيُنِنَا*) (We told them to strike each part of it with the other)

As for verse (37 :93) :

(37 *بِأَيْمَانِهِ* *وَأَنفُسَهُمْ* *فِي* *الْأَعْنَاقِ*) (he started breaking them with the right hand).

it is said that Abraham started breaking the idols made and worshipped by Quraysh . So, here, even *strike*, that most translators use to render the meaning of *drb*, is inadequate because we cannot imagine Abraham striking idols with the right hand as this act would cause him more harm than relief.

As mentioned earlier, the verb *daraba* can mean **travel, set out** (3 :156, 4 :101, 38 :44, 73 :20, 2 :273) ; **strike** (2 :60/73, 7 :160 ,8 :12,20 :77, 24 :31, 26 :63, 37 :93, 47 :4) ; **beat** (8 :50, 47 :27) ; **set up** (43 :58, 57 :13) ; **give examples** (14 :24/45, 16 :75, 76 :112, 18 :32/45, 24 :35, 38 :28 /58, 36 :78, 39 :27/29, 43 :17, 59 :21, 66 :10/11) ; **take**

away, ignore (43 :5) ; condemn (2 :61) ; seal,draw over (18 :11) ; cover (24 :31) ; explain (13 :17) ; separate, turn away (3 :34).

According to Edward William Lane (1868 : 1775), the preposition *ʔan* is not actually necessary to render the verb *daraba* as *turn away, separate*, etc.. Edward Lane, here, does not use his own knowledge of Arabic to give definitions to the words, instead, the definitions are taken from older Arabic dictionaries, such as *Taj Al Arus* (Shaykh Muhammad Almutada, 1791) and *the Misbah* (Al Feiyouni, 1987), etc... He, then, translated these definitions into English, carefully noting which dictionaries are giving which definitions.

In this way, *اضرِبوهن* in verse 34 of Surah An-nisa can mean *turn away* or *separate*, even in the absence of the preposition *ʔan*. This certainly seems the understanding of earlier Classical Arabic lexicon authorities that were scrutinised and cited by Edward Lane.

This seems logical if we look at the context preceding this verb in verse 34 : "*لِيُحْذِرُوا نِسَاءَهُمْ لِمَا بَدَأُوا بِهِمْ وَأَنَّ إِلَهُهُمُ يَدْعُنَا إِلَىٰ ضَرْبِهِمْ وَأَن يَذَرُوا فِيهَا مَوَازِينًا*" where the use of climactic order, that is from the least to the most important, indicates graduality : first advise them, if not, then, turn away from them (in bed). What seems more logical as the next step is separate from them, because beating them doesn't follow the tradition (sunnah) of step-by-step or *attadarruj* that the prophet (pbuh) was preaching. Beating, here, doesn't follow the logic of argumentation. If we consider that the general theme of the verses is to offer reconciliatory ways that would save marriage and not violence that would probably worsen the situation and which is more likely to breach the union.. The Quranic text has been so careful and so precise in the formulation of the second step to be taken by saying :

*لِيُحْذِرُوا نِسَاءَهُمْ لِمَا بَدَأُوا بِهِمْ وَأَنَّ إِلَهُهُمُ يَدْعُنَا إِلَىٰ ضَرْبِهِمْ وَأَن يَذَرُوا فِيهَا مَوَازِينًا* (turn away from them **in beds**)

There is no indication in the prophet's tradition (sunnah) that beating a woman is allowed, and the prophet (pbuh) was never reported to have beaten one of his wives. And even in situations of conflict, he used to quit home for a certain amount of time in order to allow his wives to ponder upon the issue and maybe review their behaviour or attitude.

We cannot separate the Holy Quran from the Sunnah since the Sunnah, not only explains the HQ, but it also completes it, as there are things mentioned in the Sunnah but not in the HQ. The Prophet said : « *يُعَلِّمُكَ اللَّهُ مَا لَمْ يَكُن تَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتَ تَعْلَمُ مَا لَمْ يَكُن تَعْلَمُ* » (teach and don't punish because the best teacher is the one who doesn't use violence). He also said : « *أَنْتَ تَعْلَمُ مَا لَمْ يَكُن تَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتَ تَعْلَمُ مَا لَمْ يَكُن تَعْلَمُ* ». So, we can't imagine the Prophet (pbuh) going against the will of God.

As has been shown above, the verb *اضرِبوهن* in 4 :34 can mean **shun** or **turn away from**, not necessarily **beat**, and it does not necessarily need the preposition *ʔan* for this meaning to be operative. It was also noted that the imperative form has not been used in the Quran in an unqualified manner without explaining 1) what object to use to strike with or 2) what part of the body or object to strike.

We do find in the Holy Quran many uses of *daraba* with the meaning of separate. The following verses illustrate this meaning:

(77 | ٢١) - *لِيُحْذِرُوا نِسَاءَهُمْ لِمَا بَدَأُوا بِهِمْ وَأَنَّ إِلَهُهُمُ يَدْعُنَا إِلَىٰ ضَرْبِهِمْ وَأَن يَذَرُوا فِيهَا مَوَازِينًا*!

We inspired Moses to travel with my servants and separate the sea ( create a dry path for them to go through).

*لِيُحْذِرُوا نِسَاءَهُمْ لِمَا بَدَأُوا بِهِمْ وَأَنَّ إِلَهُهُمُ يَدْعُنَا إِلَىٰ ضَرْبِهِمْ وَأَن يَذَرُوا فِيهَا مَوَازِينًا*  
13094

They were separated by a wall.....

So, as God said in 39 : 18 : «those who listen to what they are told and follow the best of its meaning, those are the ones whom God has guided and those are the ones endowed with understanding. »

One should take the most consistent rendering in light of the Quran's narratives and overarching philosophy, i.e. the best meaning possible.

The verbs *beat* or *strike* in English have many similar figurative meanings : one may *strike* a metaphor, *strike out* on a journey, say something *striking* or *beat about* the bush, beat one's brains, beat a record, etc.. And all of these uses are idiomatic.

The verb *beat* in English, that some translators (Yusuf Ali, 1934 ; Shakir, 1987 ; Al Hilali & Mohsein Khan, 1996 ; T.B. Irving, 1985 ; Muhammad Sarwar, 1981 ; Abdulmajid Daryabadi, E.H. Palmer, 1880 ; Muhammad Ayoub Khan, Mahmud Y. Yazid, 1980 ; Muhammad Asad, 1980) used to render the meaning of *daraba* in verse 34, means 'hit repeatedly (especially with a stick)' (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English).

Even Abdelahaleem Muhammad, A.S. (2004) , an Arabic-speaking Muslim who has been living in England since 1966 and who has full command of English and is fully equipped with the knowledge of both Classical and Modern Arabic, used the verb **hit** to render the meaning of *اضرِبوهن* in 3 :34.

« Husbands should take good care of their wives, with the bounties God has given some to some more than others and with what they spend out of their own money. Righteous wives are devout and guard what God would have them guard in their husbands' absence. If you fear high-handedness from your wives, remind them (of the teachings of God), then ignore them when you go to bed, then **hit** them. » ( The Quran. A new translation, p. 54)

Needless to point to the extreme contrast between **should take care of their wives** and **hit them** in this translation.



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