

From the Commentary of al-Ṭabarī on *The Heifer* 49-50 – Quran 2

﴿وَإِذْ نَجَّيْنَاكُمْ مِنْ آلِ فِرْعَوْنَ يَسُومُونَكُمْ سُوءَ الْعَذَابِ يُدَبُّونَ أَبْنَاءَكُمْ وَيَسْتَحْيُونَ نِسَاءَكُمْ وَفِي ذَلِكَ بَلَاءٌ مِّنْ رَبِّكُمْ عَظِيمٌ﴾

And when we delivered you from the followers of Pharaoh who were visiting you with evil chastisement, slaughtering your sons, and sparing your women; and in that was a great trial from your Lord

As for the interpretation of His words ‘And when We delivered you’ they are connected to His words, ‘O Children of Israel, remember My blessing’. It is as if He had said, “Remember My blessings wherewith I blessed you, and remember Our act of kindness towards you – when We delivered you from the followers of Pharaoh – by saving you from them.’

As for ‘the followers of Pharaoh’ they were the followers of his religion, his people and their partisans...

As for ‘Pharaoh’, it is said that it is a name by which the kings of the Amalekites of Egypt were called, just as some of the kings of the Romans were called ‘Caesar’, and some of them were called ‘Heraclius’, and just as the kings of Persia were called ‘Khosrows’ and one of them was called ‘Khosrow’, and the kings of the Yemen were called ‘Tabābi‘a’ and one of them ‘Tubba’.

As for the Pharaoh of Moses, from whom God narrated that He had saved the Children of Israel, it is said that his name was al-Walīd bin Muṣ‘ab al-Rayyān.

It is possible to say, ‘And when We delivered you from the followers of Pharaoh’ when those addressed had never seen Pharaoh or been saved from him, because the addressees were the children of those whom He had saved from Pharaoh and his people, and He attributes His blessing on their forefathers to them...

Question: What was this chastisement which they visited upon them, which was bad for them?

Response: It is what God described in His Book when he said, ‘Slaughtering your sons, and sparing your women’. Muḥammad bin Ishāq said concerning this:

“Pharaoh chastised the Children of Israel. He made them slaves and chattels, he categorised them according to labour. One category were the builders, one category ploughmen, and one category raised crops for him... Whichever of them was not engaged in one of his tasks for him, so he had tax upon him. He visited it upon them as God said, ‘Evil chastisements’”.

And al-Suddī said, “He allotted them squalid tasks, and began killing their sons and sparing their women”.

God attributed what the followers of Pharaoh did to the Children of Israel – their visiting them with an evil chastisement, slaughtering their sons and sparing their women – to them and not to Pharaoh, although they did what they did to them on account of Pharaoh’s power and as a result of his command, because they carried it out themselves. Thus it is clear that everyone who himself carries out the killing of someone or inflicts suffering on a life, even though it is the result of the command of another, is the agent who undertakes it; and he deserves it being attributed to him, even if the person who issues the command be a destructive ruler, and a destructive brigand, or a dissolute tyrant – compels the agent who is commanded to do it. Thus every killing carried out on the command of another is injustice, and according to us, is to be killed in retaliation, even if he was forced to kill by someone else.

As for the interpretation of the slaughtering of the Children of Israel and sparing their women, it is given in what has been reported to us from Ibn ʿAbbās and others:

On the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās: “Pharaoh and his companions recalled from among themselves what God had promised Abraham, His Friend, that He would appoint prophets and kings from among His offspring. So they deliberated and agreed that he send out men with butchers’ knives to move around the Children of Israel and to slaughter every newborn male child that they found; and they did so. However, when they saw that the elderly among the Children of Israel were dying at their appointed time, and that the young were being slaughtered, Pharaoh said, “You are on the point of exterminating the Children of Israel; so you will end up having to perform the tasks and services which they have been saving you the trouble [of doing]! So kill every newborn male one year, and their sons will become few in number, and leave off killing them the next year.’ The mother of Moses bore Aaron during a year in which boys were not slaughtered, so she gave birth to him openly and safely until, then the next came, she bore Moses”.

On the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās: “The soothsayers said to Pharaoh, ‘A child will be born this year who will destroy your reign’...So Pharaoh appointed a hundred men over every thousand women: ten men for every hundred women. And he said to them, ‘Keep watch over every pregnant woman in the town, and when she gives birth, observe the child; if it is male slaughter it, but if it female leave it.’ These were His words, ‘Slaughtering your sons, and sparing your women; and in that was a grievous trial from your Lord”.

On the authority of Abū al-ʿĀliya: “Pharaoh ruled over them for 400 years, then the soothsayers said that that year a boy would be born in Egypt who would destroy him with his own hand. So he sent out midwives among the people of Egypt, and when a woman gave birth to a boy, he was brought to Pharaoh and he killed him, but he spared the girls”.

On the authority of al-Suddī: “It happened to Pharaoh in a dream of his that a fire approached from Jerusalem until it enclosed the buildings of Egypt; it burned the Copts but it spared the Children of Israel, and it laid waste to the buildings of Egypt. So he called the magicians, the soothsayers, the seers of birds, the seers of bodily shape, and diviners, and he asked about the vision. They said to him, ‘A man will come from this land from which the Children of Israel came’ – they meant by that Jerusalem – ‘for whose sake Egypt will be destroyed’. So he commanded that every boy born to the Children of Israel should be slaughtered, but that every girl should be left. Then he said to the Copts, “Look upon your bondsmen who toil outdoors; bring them in and set the Children of Israel to take over these squalid tasks, ‘abasing one group of them and slaughtering their sons’ (Q. 28:4).” He brought about that every child born to the Children of Israel be slaughtered, and that the

young never grew up. God cast death upon the old men of the Children of Israel, and it swept speedily upon them. Then the heads of the Copts came in to Pharaoh to speak with him, and said, ‘Death has descended upon these people, and our slaves will soon have to do the labour. We slaughter their sons thus, the youths do not grow up, and the old pass away. If only you would leave some of their sons.’ So he commanded that one year they should slaughter, and the next they should desist. So Aaron was born in a year in which they did not slaughter, and he was spared, but when the year in which they slaughter came, she was pregnant with Moses”.

﴿وَإِذْ فَرَقْنَا بِكُمْ الْبَحْرَ فَأَنْجَيْنَاكُمْ وَأَغْرَقْنَا آلَ فِرْعَوْنَ وَأَنْتُمْ تَنْظُرُونَ﴾

And when We divided the sea for you and delivered you and drowned Pharaoh’s followers while you were beholding

As for the interpretation of His words, ‘And when We divided the sea for you’, they are connected to ‘And when We delivered you’ meaning: And remember My blessing wherewith I blessed you, and remember when We delivered you from the followers of Pharaoh, and when We divided the sea for you.

The meaning of ‘We divided the sea for you’ is ‘We parted the sea for you’, because there were twelve tribes, and He divided the sea into twelve paths; each tribe followed one of the paths.

On the authority of al-Suddī: “When Moses came to the sea, he named it ‘Abū Khālid’. He struck and it split apart. Every divide was like a great mountain, and the Children of Israel entered in. There were twelve paths in the sea a tribe in each path”.

Question: How did God drown the followers of Pharaoh, while saving the Children of Israel?

Response: On the authority of °Abd Allah bin Shaddād bin al-Hād al-Laythī: “I was told that Pharaoh went out in search of Moses at the head of seventy thousand black horses – besides the dappled horses in his army. Moses went forth until the sea faced him and he was unable to turn away from it, and Pharaoh came into view behind him in the midst of his army. And when the two forces sighted each other, the companions of Moses said, ‘We are overtaken!’ He, Moses, said, ‘No indeed; surely my Lord is with me; He will guide me to safety – He has promised me this, and He does not go back on His promise”.

On the authority of Ibn Ishāq: “God informed the sea by inspiration – according to what I have been told – ‘When Moses strikes you with his staff, split apart for him’...The waves of the sea began to dash against each other in fear of God, and awaited His command. Then God informed Moses by inspiration, ‘Strike the sea with your staff’, so he struck it with it. In the staff was the authority of God which He had given him, so it split apart; and each divide was like a great mountain, that is to say, like a mountain rising up from high ground. God said to Moses: ‘Strike for them a dry path in the sea, fearing not to be overtaken, nor afraid’. When the sea had settled into a dry, firm path for him, Moses proceeded along it with the Children of Israel, and Pharaoh pursued him with his troops”.

On the authority of °Abd Allah bin Shaddād bin al-Hād al-Laythī: “I have been told that when the Children of Israel had entered into the sea, and not a single one of them was left behind, Pharaoh advanced on one of his stallions until he came to a halt at the edge of the sea

which was fixed in the state it was in, but the stallion was afraid to pass through. Then Gabriel appeared to him on a mare on heat, and brought her close to him. The stallion caught her scent, and when it had caught her scent, Gabriel spurred her forward, and the stallion on which Pharaoh was mounted moved forward with her. When Pharaoh's army saw that Pharaoh had entered the sea, they followed Pharaoh and entered with him with Gabriel in front of him; and the angel Michael mounted on a mare at the rear, urged them on saying 'Keep up with your companions'. Then, when Gabriel drew out of the sea, there was no one in front of him, and Michael took up his position on the other side, and there was no one behind him, and the sea engulfed them. Thus, when he saw the authority and power of God, Pharaoh recognised his humiliation, his soul forsook him, and he shouted, 'There is no god but He in whom the Children of Israel believe; I am of those that surrender'".

On the authority of °Amr bin Maimūn al-Audī: "When Moses went out with the Children of Israel, news of this reached Pharaoh, and he said, 'Do not follow them until the cock crows'...By God, that night the cock did not crow until morning. Then he called for a sheep and it was slaughtered. Then he said, 'I shall not finish its liver until six hundred thousand Copts have been brought together for me'. And he did not finish its liver until six thousand Copts had been brought together to him. Then he set out.

When Moses reached the sea, one of his men, who was called Joshua bin Nūn said to him, 'Where did your Lord order you, Moses?' He said, 'Right ahead of you', pointing to the sea. So Joshua forced his horse to go into the sea until he was submerged, and it carried him away. Then he returned, and said, 'Where did your Lord order you, Moses? By God, you do not lie nor are you deceived.' And he did this three times. Then God inspired Moses, 'Strike the sea with your staff'; and it cleaved, and each part was a mighty mountain, meaning like a mountain...Then Moses and those with him set forth, and Pharaoh followed them in their path, until when they had all gone in, God closed it over them. This is why He said, 'And We drowned Pharaoh's followers while you were beholding'".

Ma°mar, said Qatāda said, "With Moses there were six hundred thousand, and Pharaoh followed him on one million one hundred thousand horses"...

He thereby informed them of where His proofs came to them, and reminded them of His blessings towards their ancestors, and warned them, concerning their belying His prophet Muḥammad, lest what befell Pharaoh and his followers for belying Moses should befall them.