

*With the Name of Allah, All-Merciful, Most Merciful*

## **REPENTANCE – Islamic Texts**

**Themes & Commentary, © Usama Hasan, 2010**  
**Translation of the Qur'an adapted from Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali**

### **Themes of the Texts**

The root of the Arabic word for repentance, i.e. *tawbah*, literally means, “to turn.” The verb is used both for God and man: humans turn to God away from sin in repentance whilst God in return turns to the sinner in acceptance of the repentance. The ninth surah of the Qur'an is called *al-Tawbah* or “Repentance.”

“The Heights” begins with “A. L. M. S.” and is a long surah that begins with the story of Adam, Satan and Eve, followed by a majestic passage on the Garden, Fire and the Greatness of God and the beauty of His creation. Next comes a long passage, from which the initial part only is given here, which recounts the stories of various Prophets, highlighting the similarity of their message and of the reaction from their communities. The longest such story comes last and is that of Moses and Pharaoh, the most oft-told story in the Qur'an.

The story of Adam, Satan and Eve is given here, followed by a passage on morality that is related to the previous story through the theme of clothing. Adam and Eve's prayer in ayah 23 is repeated frequently by Muslims, especially to repent to God and ask His forgiveness.

Imam al-Nawawi from the village of Nawa in Syria was a deeply-revered Sunni scholar of Hadith and the Shafi'i school of law during the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century. He was known for his asceticism: he never married, and his entire wardrobe consisted of one long shirt. His *Riyad al-Salihin* (“Gardens of the Righteous”) consists of about 370 chapters on morality, worship and general etiquettes of life. Each chapter usually begins with a few brief quotations from the Qur'an followed by numerous, often lengthy, traditions or hadith of the Prophet Muhammad. The total number of hadiths in the book is about two thousand, always quoted from the primary, canonical collections of hadith. “Gardens of the Righteous” is therefore a secondary collection of hadith. The chapter on Repentance is the second chapter of the book, the first being about sincerity of intention for the sake of God in all deeds. The book is a popular one for admonition, and extracts from its chapters will often be regularly read out after prayers in mosques around the world, as well as often being the basis for Friday sermons.

### **Points to Consider**

1. What is the nature of the Qur'anic "forbidden tree" ?
2. The themes of clothing and nudity.
3. Is not the story in hadith 3 reminiscent of that of the Prodigal Son in the New Testament?
4. Hadith 7 speaks of a pre-Islamic story. In similar contexts, this usually refers to the "People of the Book." Is such a story found in the Jewish or Christian traditions?
5. Hadith 7 implies that repentance is possible even for a serial-killer or mass-murderer. Is there still hope for today's world, then?

**Text 1: Surah *al-A'raf* (Chapter: The Heights, 7:11-36), Meccan**

**11.** It is We Who created you and gave you shape; then We bade the angels bow down to Adam, and they bowed down; not so Iblis<sup>a</sup>; He refused to be of those who bow down.

**12.** He said: "What prevented you from bowing down when I commanded you?" He said: "I am better than he: You did create me from fire, and him from clay."

**13.** He said: "Get you down from this: it is not for you to be arrogant here: get out, for thou art of the meanest (of creatures)."

**14.** He said: "Give me respite till the day they are raised up."

**15.** He said: "Be among those who have respite."

**16.** He said: "Because you have thrown me out of the way, I will truly lie in wait for them on your straight way:

**17.** "Then will I assault them from before them and behind them, from their right and their left: Nor will you find, in most of them, gratitude (for Your mercies)."

**18.** He said: "Get out from this, disgraced and expelled. If any of them follow you,- Hell will I fill with you all.

**19.** "O Adam! dwell you and your wife in the Garden, and enjoy (its good things) as you wish: but approach not this tree, or you run into harm and transgression."

**20.** Then began Satan to whisper suggestions to them, bringing openly before their minds all their shame that was hidden from them (before): he said: "Your Lord only forbade you this tree, lest you should become angels or such beings as live for ever."

**21.** And he swore to them both, that he was their sincere adviser.

**22.** So by deceit he brought about their fall: when they tasted of the tree, their shame became manifest to them, and they began to sew together the leaves of the garden over their bodies. And their Lord called unto them: "Did I not forbid you that tree, and tell you that Satan was an avowed enemy unto you?"

**23.** They said: "Our Lord! We have wronged our own souls: If you forgive us not and bestow not upon us Your Mercy, we shall certainly be lost."

**24.** He said: "Get you down, with enmity between yourselves. On earth will be your dwelling-place and your means of livelihood,- for a time."

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<sup>a</sup> A Qur'anic name for Satan, possibly related to the Greek *diabolis*, which gives us the English word, "diabolical." The change of name from Iblis to Shaytan (Satan) during this passage is intriguing.

**25.** He said: “Therein shall you live, and therein shall you die; but from it shall you be taken out (at last).”

**26.** O Children of Adam! We have bestowed garments upon you to cover your shame, as well as to be an adornment to you. But the garment of righteousness,- that is the best. Such are among the Signs of Allah, that they may receive admonition!

**27.** O Children of Adam! Let not Satan seduce you, in the same manner as He got your parents out of the Garden, stripping them of their garments, to expose their shame: for he and his tribe watch you from a position where you cannot see them: We made the satans friends (only) to those without faith.

**28.** When they do anything that is shameful, they say: “We found our fathers doing so”; and “Allah commanded us thus”: Say: “Nay, Allah never commands what is shameful: do you say of Allah what you know not?”

**29.** Say: “My Lord has commanded justice; and that you set your whole selves (to Him) at every time and place of prayer, and call upon Him, making your devotion sincere as in His sight: such as He created you in the beginning, so shall you return.”

**30.** Some He has guided: others have (by their choice) deserved the loss of their way; in that they took the satans, in preference to Allah, for their friends and protectors, and think that they receive guidance.

**31.** O Children of Adam! wear your beautiful apparel at every time and place of prayer. Eat and drink, but waste not by excess, for Allah loves not the wasters.

**32.** Say: Who has forbidden the beautiful (gifts) of Allah, which He has produced for His servants, and the things, clean and pure, (which He has provided) for sustenance? Say: They are, in the life of this world, for those who believe, (and) purely for them on the Day of Judgment. Thus do We explain the signs in detail for those who understand.

**33.** Say: the things that my Lord has indeed forbidden are: shameful deeds, whether open or secret; sins and trespasses against truth or reason; assigning of partners to Allah, for which He has given no authority; and saying things about Allah of which you have no knowledge.

**34.** To every people is a term appointed: when their term is reached, not an hour can they cause delay, nor (an hour) can they advance (it in anticipation).

**35.** O Children of Adam! whenever there come to you apostles from amongst you, rehearsing My signs unto you,- those who are righteous and mend (their lives),- on them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve.

**36.** But those who reject Our signs and treat them with arrogance,- they are companions of the Fire, to dwell therein (for ever).

**Text 2: Selections from the Chapter on Repentance in Imam al-Nawawi's *Riyad al-Salihin* ("Gardens of the Righteous") – translation by Usama Hasan**

The people of knowledge say that repentance is obligatory from every sin.

If the disobedience in question is solely between a servant and Allah Exalted, having no relationship with a human right, the repentance has three conditions: firstly, he must desist from the disobedience; secondly, he must regret doing it; thirdly, he must resolve firmly not to return to it ever. If any one of these conditions is missing, the repentance is not valid.

If the disobedience involves (violation of) a human right, the repentance has a fourth condition: that he should restore the right of the person. If it involves someone's wealth etc., this should be returned to the person. If it involves the legal penalty for slandering a woman's chastity etc., he must undergo the punishment or ask for it to be forgiven. If it involves backbiting, this must be rectified or forgiven.

It is obligatory to repent from all sins. If a person repents from some of his sins, his repentance from those sins is valid in the view of the people of truth, but he remains liable for the rest. There are numerous proofs from the Book, the Sunnah and the Consensus of the Community that support each other to establish the obligation of repentance.

Allah Exalted says, "Repent to Allah together, O believers, that you may prosper."<sup>b</sup> The Exalted also says, "Seek forgiveness from your Lord and repent to Him."<sup>c</sup> The Exalted also says, "O you who believe! Repent to Allah – a pure, sincere repentance!"<sup>d</sup>

1. On the authority of Abu Hurayrah, Allah be pleased with him, who said: I heard the Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and grant him peace, saying, "By Allah! Truly, I certainly seek the forgiveness of Allah and repent to Him more than seventy times a day." It was transmitted by al-Bukhari.
2. On the authority of al-Agharr bin Yasar al-Muzani, Allah be pleased with him, who said: The Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, "O people! Repent to Allah and seek His forgiveness, for truly, I repent to Him a hundred times a day." It was transmitted by Muslim.
3. On the authority of Abu Hamza, Anas bin Malik, Allah be pleased with him, servant of the Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and grant him peace, who said: The Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, "Verily, Allah is happier at the repentance of His servant than one of you coming across

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<sup>b</sup> Al-Nur (Light, 24:31)

<sup>c</sup> Hud, 11:3

<sup>d</sup> *al-Tahrim* (The Prohibition, 66:8)

his mount that he had lost in the desert.” Agreed upon.<sup>e</sup>

In one version transmitted by Muslim, “Verily, Allah is happier at the repentance of His servant when he repents to Him that one of you who was riding his mount in the desert. The mount slipped away from him, carrying his food and drink, and he despaired of ever finding it. He came to a tree and lay down in its shade, having despaired of finding his mount. While he was lying there like that, behold! His mount was standing beside him, so he grabbed its reins and said out of extreme joy, ‘O Allah! You are my servant and I am your Lord!’ He speaks mistakenly out of extreme joy.”

4. On the authority of Abu Musa, ‘Abdullah bin Qays al-Ash’ari, Allah be pleased with him, that the Prophet, Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, “Truly, Allah extends His Hand by night that the sinner by day may repent, and extends His Hand by day that the sinner by night may repent, until the sun rises from its setting-place.” Transmitted by Muslim.
5. On the authority of Abu Hurayrah, Allah be pleased with him, who said: the Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, “Whoever repents before the sun rises from its setting-place, Allah turns to him in acceptance.” Transmitted by Muslim.
6. On the authority of Abu ‘Abd al-Rhman ‘Abdullah bin ‘Umar bin al-Khattab, Allah be pleased with both of them, that the Prophet, Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, “Truly Allah, Mighty and Majestic, accepts the repentance of the servant until the last throes of death.”<sup>f</sup> Transmitted by Tirmidhi, who said that it was a sound hadith.
7. On the authority of Abu Sa’id, Sa’d bin Malik bin Sinan al-Khudri, Allah be pleased with him, that the Prophet of Allah, Allah bless him and grant him peace, said:

There was, in the nations before you, a man who had killed ninety-nine souls. He asked for the most knowledgeable person on earth, and was directed to a monk. He came to him and told him that he had killed ninety-nine people, and asked if it was possible for him to repent. The monk replied, “No.” So he killed him and completed a hundred by him. He asked again for the most knowledgeable person on earth, and was directed to a person of learning. He came to him and told him that he had killed a hundred people, and asked if it was possible for him to repent. He replied, “Yes. Who can prevent you from repenting? Travel to such-and-such a land, for there there are people who worship Allah: worship Allah with them. Do not return to your land, for it is a land of evil.”

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<sup>e</sup> “Agreed upon” means that it was transmitted by the two foremost compilers of Hadith, i.e. Bukhari and Muslim.

<sup>f</sup> Literally, “until the choking or gargling sound” as the soul leaves the body.

He began travelling but when he reached half-way, death came to him. The angels of mercy and the angels of punishment disputed over him. The angels of mercy said, “He came in repentance, turning his heart towards Allah Exalted.” The angels of punishment said, “Truly, he never did any good whatsoever.” An angel came to them in human form so they appointed him as arbiter between them. He said, “Measure the distance between him and the two lands – whichever one is nearer, he belongs to it.” So they measured and found that he was nearer to his destination, so the angels of mercy took him.” Agreed upon.

In an authentic narration: “He was nearer to the village of goodness by a handspan, and so was counted amongst its people.” In another authentic narration: “Allah Exalted inspired to that land to move away, and to this land to move closer, and said: ‘Measure the distance between them.’ They found that he was nearer to this land by a handspan, so he was forgiven.” In one narration: “He turned his chest towards his destination.”

8. On the authority of Ibn ‘Abbas, Allah be pleased with both of them, that the Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, “Were the son of Adam to possess a valley of gold, he would love to possess two (such) valleys. But nothing will fill his mouth except dust. Allah turns (in acceptance) to whoever turns (in repentance, this is a must).”<sup>g</sup>
9. On the authority of Abu Hurayrah, Allah be pleased with him, that the Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, “Allah, Glorified and Exalted, laughs upon two men, one of whom kills the other but they both enter the Garden. One of them fights in the way of Allah and is killed. Then Allah turns to the killer, who submits (embraces Islam) and is martyred.” Agreed upon.

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<sup>g</sup> I have attempted to capture a sense of the original rhyming prose in the translation.

## Commentary

In the Qur'anic accounts, the story of Adam and Eve and their fall is preceded by the even more important story of Adam and Satan, especially Satan's fall.

The doctrine of original sin is absent from Islam because of Adam and Eve's repentance, signified by their prayer, 7:23.

The phrase, "forbidden tree" occurs in the Qur'an, rather than "forbidden fruit." Some commentators speculated on the nature of the tree and its fruit, although the more sensible ones pointed out that clearly, this does not matter too much, the moral of the story being paramount.

The "tree of knowledge" is a possible explanation for the forbidden tree because the Arabic for tree (*shajarah*) also refers to the erupting of disputes, since disputation and argumentation often has a tree-structure: shoots and leaves branching off from the root cause(s) of the dispute. Further, it is repeatedly stated in the Qur'an that schism and disputation amongst religious communities only begins after knowledge comes to them. In the Islamic tradition, knowledge is a dangerous weapon and its correct usage must be learnt carefully.

Another interpretation of the forbidden tree is a popular but minority view that is also indicated by the great scholar, revivalist and mystic, Shah Waliullah of Delhi (10<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century). This proceeds on the basis that no fruit makes people feel naked, such that they must cover themselves with leaves: therefore the fruit is metaphorical, and refers to the sexual act. Satan's promise in 7:20 that approaching the tree would make Adam and Eve live forever refers to their seemingly-eternal life through their descendants. This interpretation opens up new dimensions and vistas of meanings for married life, where husband and wife recreate the "original sin" of their first ancestors, but in a sacred and holy setting. There is also a subversive element to the idea that "original sin" becomes "sacred worship."

Imam Nawawi's expertise as a jurist can be seen in his legalistic approach with terms and conditions etc. to what is essentially a spiritual action, i.e. repentance. The hadiths he quotes here are much-loved and oft-quoted, especially in Friday sermons. There is a rich tradition of commentary on these hadiths also.