

Unveiling the *Mushrikin*

Double meanings, direct messages, ambiguous terms...it is that essence of mystery that enraptures lovers of literature to delve into their favorite pieces for hours, days, or years. And this especially applies to the central holy text for followers of Islam, the Qur'an. One aspect of the text that has been of popular discourse across the centuries involves the term *mushrik*.

Mushrik is mentioned in 19 surahs, in 43 verses, 49 times, and translated it can mean either "idolator" or "polytheist." Within this essay we will look into Qur'anic verses concerning the term and conclude who, exactly, falls under the term *mushrik*.

If we are to first decipher '*mushrik*' with hopes of finding the most accurate definition, then perhaps the best line of action would be to go through the holy text chronologically and see how it applies to the setting and events surrounding the time of its revelation. The first time we see *mushrik* is in Surah Al-Qasas, "And let them not divert you from the Revelations of Allah after they have been sent down to you. Call upon your Lord, and do not be one of the idolaters" (28:87). Al-Qasas, translated to "The Story," essentially covers Prophet Moses' fight for freedom and quenches any doubt of Muhammad's prophethood. During this time Prophet Muhammad resided in Mecca, which mainly consisted of tribal communities (the largest being Muhammad's own—the Qurayshi) who tended to be traders and nomads, all of which were often idol worshippers/paganists (Hawting 3). It can be determined that the 'idolaters' mentioned within Surah Al-Qasas were directed at the following individuals, as the first group of people Muhammad would have spread his revelations to beyond his family would be those residing nearest to him. And, like those in the verse who reject the revelations of Allah, it is likely they would have done the same to Muhammad's preachings as the oasis town, and most who are faced with new ideas, tend to cling to tradition.

Mushrik is then revealed in four more surahs out of six subsequent ones. The second time the term is called upon it is translated to ‘polytheists’ in Surah Yunus, or “Jonas” (Qur’an 10:105). Here, too, the chapter focuses on establishing the veracity of the Qur’anic verses, thus those who fall under *mushrik* are the same as ‘idolaters’.

Of these five, and the 19 surahs in general, it is Surah Yusuf where *mushrik* does not translate directly to either polytheist or idolator. But rather as those who “...do not believe in Allah without associating others with Him ‘in worship’” (12:106). Here we see a rather more direct exemplification of who may be considered *mushrikin*, and again, we see that it still applies to the Meccans Muhammad was surrounded by, as that was the setting of where the Surah was revealed.

The next time we see *mushrik* revealed is within Surah Al-Ghaafir, Fussilat, and Ash-Shura, which were revealed in tandem with one another. Soon after we see *mushrik* be revealed within the surahs surrounding the Prophet Muhammad’s Hejira, a flight to escape persecution, from Mecca to Medina. This transition can be seen in our last Meccan verse concerning *mushrik*: “Returning unto Him. Fear Him, perform the prayer, and do not be like the idolaters” (30:31). And our first Medinan surah, Al-Baqarah, “The Cow,” “Neither the unbelievers among the People of the Book nor the polytheists wish to see any good (revelation) sent down to you from your Lord. Allah favors with His Mercy whomever He wishes, and Allah's Bounty is great ” (2:105). Here we see a transition, and what can be considered the initial point of origin for the great discourse to be discussed later on; in the thirtieth surah, Ar-Rum, “The Romans,” it almost feels as though we are leaving the ‘idolaters’ behind. In cases prior to this, the *mushrikun* are an example of what not be for those unfamiliar (and familiar, but for historical context let’s ignore that) with Islam. Yet here it seems that Allah trusts those who this

verse is revealed upon in their faith, and in Him, and encourages them to move onwards, without looking back at the idolaters to be left behind in Mecca as they trudge onwards behind their Prophet.

And once they succeed, the next we hear of the *mushrikin*, it seems, the term broadens not just to polytheists and idolaters but “unbelievers among the People of the Book ” (Qur’an 2:105). As it is during the Hejira that Muhammad was brought “... into contact with a substantial Jewish [and Christian] community which lived there together with the pagan Arabs” (Hawting 3). This confusion is further exacerbated as Al-Baqarah later declares:

Do not marry unbelieving women (polytheists) until they believe. A believing slave-girl is certainly better than an unbelieving woman, even if the latter pleases you. And do not give your women (believing) in marriage to polytheists until they believe. A believing slave is certainly better than a polytheist, even if the latter pleases you. Those (polytheists) call to the Fire and Allah calls to Paradise and Forgiveness by His Leave; He makes clear His Revelations to mankind so that they may be mindful. (2:221)

Here *mushrik* does not seem to apply to Jewish and Christian individuals and yet “...the majority of scholars argue that the word [*mushrikat*] in the verse does not include women from the [Book]” but does apply to all non-Muslim groups for men (Elmali-Karakaya). But as Elmali-Karakaya points out, the Qur’an lies on a foundation of equality and thus a varying definition of *mushrikat* based on sex only holds due to popular belief rather than anything else. Through Hawtings work it also seems the term *mushrikat* refers only to pagan Arabs and is loosely tied to those “...accused of the sins of shirk and kufr. The latter...loosely understood as ‘unbelief’ or ‘rejection of the truth’” and thus can be argued it applies to Jews and Christians (Hawting 2). Hawting later also points out that *shirk* more accurately refers to those associating

other goods and beings with God, and with such a definition, it can be also argued that Islam only directly denounces polytheism and idolatry enacted by Arabs of central and western Arabia (Hawting 2-5). This is further solidified by the fact that, although Christians may be guilty of committing *shirk* in the eyes of some Muslim exegetes, the opening verses of Ar-Rum distinguish Christian Byzantines as ‘People of the Book’ rather than *mushrikin* (Hawting 87).

As the revelations of the Qur’an wrap up, *mushrik* is brought up in six more surahs, the last being Surah At-Tawba, which covers the topic to the same extent as Surah Al-An’aam and Al-Baqrah and is a source of heavy debate, as well. Within these concluding surahs we, again, see a distinction between the ‘People of the Book’ and *mushrikin*, “Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a hanif (‘one who turned away from paganism.’) and a Muslim. (‘Muslim’ here stands for one who believes in the unity of Allah.) And he was not one of the polytheists” (3:37). And as the rule goes, later revelations override their predecessors, thus it can be assumed that *mushrik* still only points toward polytheists and idolaters who had been familiarized with the teachings of Allah and still chose to overlook them. The surah from which this verse is from, Surah Al-Imran also refers to the Battles of Badr and Uhud against the Meccan Quraysh who fall under the term *mushrikin*.

Later revelations supersede their predecessors, and thus it's important to note Surah Al-Bayannah, revealed after At-Tawba, twice opposes the argument just made: “The unbelievers, among the ‘People of the Book’ and the idolaters” (98:1 and 98:6) as here those of the Book and idolaters are grouped together once again. Over time, many exegetes have agreed with such views—“Al-Tusi accepts the view that Jews and Christians belong to the category of *mushrikun* and explains his position with reference to the alleged ambiguity of their monotheism,” as they considered Ezra or Jesus the son of God and thus, associated someone else with God (Darwish

296). But other exegetes care to differ, "...Mughniyyah observes that the Qur'an uses the word *mushrikun* to consistently refer to those, especially Arabs, who quite literally worship idols. When Jews and Christians are intended, it uses the phrase *ahl al-kitab*" (Darwish 299). In the case of verses 98:1 and 98:6, it can be assumed it is a mix of both. That, perhaps, Jews and Christians do not fall under *mushrikin* if they are aware of and accept Islam as a valid religion with truth to it, but the moment they denounce Islam despite the likeness with their religion then they are similar to Arab idolaters and polytheists who are considered *mushrikin* due to condemning the religion that was revealed to them.

With the analysis of *mushrik* in Qur'anic verses, the historical context of these verses, and the analysis of exegetes' opinions can we now come to a conclusion of who exactly the *mushrikin* are. *Mushrikin*, in its historical context "target[s] idolatrous and polytheistic Arab contemporaries, townsmen and neighbors, of Muhammad [and reverts]" (Hawting 45). With his ties to the Qurayshi tribe, this could have involved far-reaching relatives, as well. The original *mushrikin* were those residing, or even passing through, the oasis town of Mecca and thus were likely traders and slaveowners who then later waged war against the Prophet. If we are to apply the term to the modern day, then it can be argued that followers of religions where God is associated with something other than fall under *mushrikin*. This would mean idolaters and polytheists are considered, not just within historical Arabia but the rest of the world, too. And with this, those who are 'People of the Book' and yet refuse to acknowledge any truth of its familial religion would fall under the term as well.

Works Cited

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