

10251 - Meanings of the word ummah in the Qur'aan

the question

Whilst reading the Qur'aan I have come across the word “ummah” several times and I have the feeling that it has numerous meanings, not just one meaning. Is this correct? How should we understand this word?

Detailed answer

Shaykh Muhammad al-Ameen al-Shanqeeti (may Allaah have mercy on him) said:

The word ummah is used in four senses in the Qur'aan:

1 – The word ummah is used to mean a period of time, as in the aayahs (interpretation of the meanings):

“And if We delay the torment for them till a determined term [ila ummatin ma'doodah]”[Hood 11:8]

“Then the man who was released (one of the two who were in prison), now at length [ba'da ummatin] remembered”[Yoosuf 12:45]

2 – It is used to mean a group of people, which is the usual usage, as in the aayahs (interpretation of the meaning):

“he found there a group of men [ummatan min al-naas] watering (their flocks)”[al-Qasas 28:23]

“And for every Ummah (community or nation) there is a Messenger”[Yoonus 10:47]

“Mankind were one community [ummah]”[al-Baqarah 2:213]

and there are other similar aayahs.

3 – The word ummah is used to refer to a man who is taken as a leader, as in the aayah (interpretation of the meaning):

“Verily, Ibraaheem (Abraham) was an Ummah (a leader having all the good righteous qualities)”[al-Nahl 16:120]

4 – The word ummah is used to mean a way or religion, as in the aayahs (interpretation of the meanings):

“They say: “We found our fathers following a certain way and religion [ummah]”[al-Zukhruf 43:23]

“Truly, this, your Ummah [Sharee‘ah or religion (Islamic Monotheism)] is one religion”[al-Anbiyaa’ 21:92]

and there are other similar aayahs.