20894 - Obligation to destroy idols

the question

Is it obligatory to destroy statues in Islam, even if they are part of the legacy of human civilization? Why is it that when the Sahaabah conquered other lands and saw statues there they did not destroy them?.

Detailed answer

The evidence of sharee'ah indicates that it is obligatory to destroy idols, for example:

1 – Muslim (969) narrated that Abu'l-Hayaaj al-Asadi said: 'Ali ibn Abi Taalib said to me: "Shall I not send you with the same instructions as the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) sent me? 'Do not leave any image without defacing it or any built-up grave without leveling it.'"

2 – Muslim (832) narrated from 'Urwah ibn 'Abasah that he said to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him): "With what were you sent?" He said, "I was sent to uphold the ties of kinship, to break the idols, and so that Allaah would be worshipped alone with no partner or associate."

The obligation to destroy them is even stronger if they are worshipped instead of Allaah.

3 – al-Bukhaari (3020) and Muslim (2476) narrated that Jareer ibn 'Abd-Allaah al-Bajali said: The Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said to me: "O Jareer, will you not relieve me of Dhu'l-Khalsah?" That was a house (in Yemen) belonging to the (tribe of) Khath'am, which was called Ka'bat al-Yamaaniyyah. I set out with one hundred and fifty horsemen. I used not to sit firm on horses and I mentioned that to the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him). He struck me on my chest with his hand and said, 'O Allaah! Make him firm and make him one who guides others and is guided on the right path.' " So Jareer went and burned it with fire, then Jareer sent a man called Abu Artaat to the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him). He said, "I did not come to you

until we had left it like a scabby camel.” Then the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) blessed the horses of (the tribe of) Ahmas and their men five times.

Al-Haafiz Ibn Hajar said:

This hadeeth indicates that it is prescribed to remove things that may tempt or confuse the people, whether they are buildings, people, animals or inanimate objects.

4 – The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) sent Khaalid ibn al-Waleed (may Allaah be pleased with him) on a campaign to destroy al-‘Uzza.

5 – and he sent Sa’d ibn Zayd al-Ashhali (may Allaah be pleased with him) on a campaign to destroy Manaat.

6 – And he sent ‘Amr ibn al-‘Aas (may Allaah be pleased with him) on a campaign to destroy Suwaa’. All of that happened after the Conquest of Makkah.

Al-Bidaayah wa’l-Nihaayah, 4/712. 776. 5/83; al-Seerah al-Nabawiyyah by Dr. ‘Ali al-Salaabi, 2/1186.

Al-Nawawi said in Sharh Muslim when discussing the issue of image-making:

They were unanimously agreed that whatever casts a shadow is not allowed and must be changed.

Images that cast a shadow are three-dimensional images like these statues.

With regard to what is said about the Sahaabah (may Allaah be pleased with them) not destroying idols in the conquered lands, this is merely conjecture. The companions of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) would not have left idols and statues alone, especially since they were worshipped at that time.

If it is asked, how come the Sahaabah left alone the ancient idols of the Pharaohs and Phoenicians? The answer is that these idols fall into one of three categories:

1 – These idols may have been in remote places that the Sahaabah did not reach; when the Sahaabah conquered Egypt, for example, that does not mean that they reached every part of the land.

2 – These idols may not have been visible, rather they may have been inside Pharaonic buildings etc. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) told us to hasten when passing through the abodes of the wrongdoers and those who had been punished, and he forbade entering such places. In al-Saheehayn it is says: “Do not enter upon those who have been punished unless you are weeping, lest there befall you something like that which befall them.” He (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said that when he passed by ashaab al-hijr [the dwellers of the rocky tract – see al-Hijr 15:80], in the land of Thamood, the people of Saalih (peace be upon him).

According to another report narrated in al-Saheehayn, “If you are not weeping, then do not enter upon them, lest there befall you something like that which befall them.”

What we think is that if the companions of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) saw a temple or building belonging of these people, they did not enter it or even look at what was inside it.

This will dispel any confusion about why the Sahaabah did not see the Pyramids or what is inside them. There is also the possibility that their doors and entrances were covered with sand at that time.

3 – Many of these idols that are visible nowadays were covered and hidden, and have only been discovered recently, or they have been brought from remote places that the companions of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) did not reach.

Al-Zarkali was asked about the Pyramids and the Sphinx etc: Did the Sahaabah who entered Egypt see them?

He said: They were mostly covered with sand, especially the Sphinx.

Shibh Jazeerat al-‘Arab, 4/1188

Then even if we assume that there was a statue that was visible and not hidden, then we still have to prove that the Sahaabah saw it and were able to destroy it.

The fact of the matter is that the Sahaabah (may Allaah be pleased with them) would not have been able to destroy some of these statues. It took twenty days to destroy some of these statues even with tools, equipment, and explosives etc that were not available to the Sahaabah at all.

This is indicated by what Ibn Khuldoon said in al-Muqaddimah (p. 383), that the caliph al-Rasheed was unable to destroy the estrade of Chosroes. He started to do that, and he gathered men and tools, and burned it with fire, and poured vinegar on it, but he was unable to do it. And the caliph al-Ma'moon wanted to destroy the Pyramids in Egypt and he gathered workers but he could not do it.

With regard to the excuse that these statues are part of the legacy of mankind, no attention should be paid to such words. Al-Laat, al-'Uzaa, Hubal, Manaat and other idols were also a legacy for those who worshipped them among Quraysh and the Arabs.

This is a legacy, but it is a haraam legacy which should be uprooted. When the command comes from Allaah and His Messenger, then the believer must hasten to obey, and the command of Allaah and His Messenger cannot be rejected on the grounds of this flimsy excuse. Allaah says (interpretation of the meaning):

"The only saying of the faithful believers, when they are called to Allaah (His Words, the Qur'aan) and His Messenger, to judge between them, is that they say: "We hear and we obey." And such are the successful (who will live forever in Paradise)"

[al-Noor 24:51]

We ask Allaah to help the Muslims to do that which He loves and which pleased Him.

And Allaah knows best.