193409 - Do the words of Allah, “And full-breasted maidens of equal age (wa kawaa‘ib atraaban)” describe the breasts of al-hoor al-‘iyn?

the question

I have a question which has been bothering me a little bit on my view of islam, regarding surah 78 verse 32-33. In english translation it says: (31) Gardens enclosed and vineyards, (32) And full-breasted'' maidens of equal age.
What does this verse mean exactly?
Does it litterally mean that people in paradise will be given women with good looking breast?
Doesnt feel good reading it in a relgious script.
I dont see why it has to be said anyway,it already says in the quran that men will get married with good looking wives . Whats the point of pointing out the look of the womens breast in paradise?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

First of all, we thank you for getting in touch with our website and we hope that you will find it useful and beneficial.

To answer your question, we would say that any critic of any text, whether it is a sacred text or a work of human literature, must pay attention in his criticism to the environment in which the text originally appeared, in terms of time, place, people and circumstances. When the critic wants to develop a precise understanding of a particular expression, he also has to closely examine the roots of that phrase in the language in which it originally appeared, the various ways in which it is used, and the meaning and general context for which it is used.

The fair-minded researcher is the one who always assumes that translation is not able to transmit the meaning as intended, and the translation is not going to be able to choose the right

vocabulary that conveys all the shades of meaning carried in the original words, on the basis of the environment in which the original words were used. If he does not bear this in mind, he will not be able to reach the proper understanding and correct conclusion.

Based on that, we say to you that with regard to the literal translation of the word kawaa'ib, it is the plural of the word kaa'ib, which refers to a female with developing breasts, as it says in Majmal al-Lughah, 1/787

Ibn Faaris (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Ka'b comes from a sound root that is indicative of a thing beginning to develop and emerge. From the same root comes the word ka'b, which refers to the ankle, which is the bone on the two sides of the lower leg where it meets the foot; and the word Ka'bah which refers to the House of Allah, may He be exalted; it is so called because of its prominence and its square shape. A woman is described as kaa'ib when her breasts begin to develop. End quote from Maqaayees al-Lughah, 5/186. See also al-Qaamoos al-Muheet, p. 131; Lisaan al-'Arab, 1/719. This is the literal meaning of the word in terms of linguistic roots.

But it is very inappropriate to limit one's examination to the literal, dictionary meaning of the roots of a word in any language; rather it is also essential to pay attention to the context in which the speakers of that language themselves use a word. Do you not see that the Arabs use the word al-haa'id (lit. menstruating) in ways other than its literal meaning? Rather they may use this word to refer to an adult woman who has reached the age when she begins to menstruate; they do not mean that she has got her monthly period at that moment in time. For example, it is proven from 'Aa'ishah (may Allah be pleased with her) that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "Allah does not accept the prayer of any haa'id without a head cover." Narrated by Abu Dawood, 641. It is well known in Islamic teachings that it is not valid for a woman to offer the prayer at the time of her menses; rather it is forbidden for her to do that, according to scholarly consensus, until her period ends and she purifies herself after that.

The one who understands this word according to its literal, dictionary meaning will encounter this

erroneous contradiction. But the one who understands it as it is used by the Arabs, referring to an adult woman who has reached the age when she begins to menstruate, even if she is not actually menstruating at the moment, will understand the hadeeth properly and will understand the way in which the Arabs use the word.

We may say something similar about describing a woman as kaa'ib in Arabic; it is not intended as an erotic, physical description of any part of the woman's body, as much as it is intended as a description of the girl in terms of the emergence of the signs of femininity in her, as an indication of her young age and youthfulness, so that men would be attracted to her. At this age the signs of femininity begin to appear in the girl. The point of using this word is not to describe the size of the breasts or to note their form or shape; rather the purpose is to highlight the woman's youthfulness.

Ibn al-Jawzi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The woman is a tiflah (little girl) when she is small, waleedah when she begins to walk, then a kaa'ib when her breasts begin to appear, then a naahid when they increase in size, then ma'sar when she reaches the age of puberty, then khawd when she reaches the age of a young woman.

End quote from Akhbaar an-Nisa', p. 228.

It says in Sharh Ma'aani Shi'r al-Mutanabbi by Ibn al-Ifleeli (vol. 1, 2/270): A young man is called shaabb and a young woman is called kaa'ib. End quote.

Imam az-Zajjaaj – who is one of the leading scholars of the Arabic language – says:

The phrase "wa kawaa'ib atraaban (translated above as: And full-breasted maidens of equal age)" means that they are all of the same age, which is the pinnacle of youth and beauty.

End quote from Ma'aani al-Qur'an wa I'raabihi, 4/338

Look at how the scholars (may Allah have mercy on them) explain this description, kaa'ib, as referring to one of the stages in a girl's life; it is not intended as an erotic description of her body,

even though that may be the literal meaning.

This is exactly the same as the way in which the Arabs use the word haa'id to refer to reaching the age of physical maturity; they do not mean that the woman is actually menstruating.

There is further clear evidence in the fact that the Arabs use this word in both poetry and prose in the context of describing a woman's chastity and honourable nature, not in the context of an erotic description aimed at provoking desire. When the Arab poet describes a girl as kaa'ib, he is not referring to her breasts or their size or roundness; rather it is a description of any young girl, and this word is used in pure and refined types of love poetry that are far removed from any sexual connotations.

ath-Tha'labi said in al-Kashf wa'l-Bayaan (10/118):

Hence al-Maawardi (may Allah have mercy on him) said in his commentary on the word kawaa'ib in this verse: It refers to maidens or virgins. This was stated by ad-Dahhaak.

End quote from an-Nukat wa'l-'Uyoon, 6/188.

This report from ad-Dahhaak was narrated by Ibn al-Mundhir; ad-Durr al-Manthoor, 8/398

If you study the Holy Qur'an, you will always find metaphors using words that eloquently convey subtle meanings, such as the verse in which Allah describes the marital relationship (interpretation of the meaning):

"They are your garments and ye are their garments"

[al-Baqarah 2:187].

Other examples:

"And among His Signs is this, that He created for you wives from among yourselves, that you may find repose in them, and He has put between you affection and mercy. Verily, in that are indeed signs for a people who reflect"

[ar-Room 30:21]

“…or you have been in contact with women…”

[an-Nisa’ 4:43].

If you were to translate these phrases literally, the meaning would not be understood, because the literal translation of the words libaas (garments), sakan (repose) and lamas (touch, contact) does not convey what is meant. Rather the context of the verses indicates that what is meant here is a metaphor that refers to the reality of marital life, but from a spiritual point of view. But if you translate these words into English in the sense of sexual intercourse, that may lead to thinking that the Holy Qur’an speaks a great deal about physical desires and uses words that directly refer to that, when that is not the case.

We are establishing this so that you will understand the importance of the critic paying attention to Arabic usage of the word according to its context, and the importance of paying attention to the gap that a literal translation may cause between the real meaning and the literal meaning of the word.

After studying a number of translations of the meanings of the Holy Qur’an into English it becomes clear that the translators differed in the ways in which they rendered the meaning of this verse, “wa kawaa‘ib atraaban”; they fall into two categories.

The first group gave the literal meaning of the word without paying attention to the usage of this word in the context of referring to age. So the translation appeared in the following wording which caused confusion to the questioner:

“And young full-breasted (mature) maidens of equal age.”

It was translated in this manner by Dr. Taqiy ad-Deen al-Hilaali and Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, in the Translation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur’an, printed by the King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur’an (p. 811). This is a link to their official site:

http://www.qurancomplex.org/Quran/Targama/Targama.asp?l=arb&t=eng&nSora=78&nAya=31

It was translated in a similar manner by both Laleh Baktiar and Ibrahim Walk.

This is an imprecise translation, not only because it does not pay attention to what we have discussed above of the intended meaning of the word kawaa'ib, but also because it does not pay attention to the dictionary meaning either. "Full-breasted" in English is indicative of the size of a woman's breasts and describes them as being large and full, when in fact the literal, dictionary meaning of the word kaa'ib is the one whose breasts are beginning to develop or have begun to appear, as quoted above from Arabic dictionaries. This means that they have begun to appear and take on the feminine form, not that they have become completely developed as is implied by the word "full".

Arthur J Arberry translated it as follows:

"and maidens with swelling breasts, like of age."

Sarwar translated it in a similar manner:

"maidens with pears-shaped breasts who are of equal age"

Another translation says:

"and voluptuous women of equal age".

All of these are translations a focus on the physical shape of the breasts. Describing the breasts is being pear-shaped or voluptuous or swelling are phrases that are imprecise and do not reflect the intended meaning of the Arabic phrases.

The second group paid attention to what we have mentioned above and translated the meaning of the word kawaa'ib according to the context in accordance with the intended meaning, and not the unintended literal meaning. We will quote these translations here, with the names of the translators, and we call upon translators to correct their translations.

The best of them in our opinion is the translation of Maulana Muhammad Ali:

And youthful (companions), equals in age”

The other correct translations are as follows:

Marmaduke Pickthall: “And maidens for companions”

Abdullah Yusuf Ali: “Companions of equal age”

Muhammad Taqi Uthmani: “And buxom maidens of matching age”.

And Allah knows best.