SAMPLE

The Prohibition of Backbiting: The

Devouring of the Dead Ghibah (غيبة) in the Quran

Aira Aurora

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Introduction: The Flesh of Your Brother

No image in the Quran is more viscerally disturbing than the image of backbiting. The Quran does not merely prohibit speaking ill of others behind their backs — it describes the act in terms that make the stomach turn: "O you who believe, avoid much suspicion. Indeed, some suspicion is sin. And do not spy or backbite one another. Would one of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would detest it. And fear Allah. Indeed, Allah is Accepting of Repentance and Merciful" (49:12). The verse compares backbiting to eating the flesh of a dead brother — an act so revolting that no person would contemplate it. The comparison is the Quran's way of making the invisible visible: the backbiter does not see the harm of their words, so the Quran gives them an image they can see — the image of a person eating the flesh of their own dead brother — and says: this is what you are doing.

This book — the eighth in the Commands & Prohibitions sub-series — explores the Quranic prohibition of backbiting (ghibah). It examines the foundational verse (49:12), the theological foundation (Allah as the Protector of honor), the nature of backbiting as a hidden crime, the anatomy of the tongue as the weapon, the prophetic models of restraint, the psychology of the hypocrite who speaks, the social poison that destroys trust, the specific exceptions when speaking is permitted, and the spiritual reward of the person who guards their tongue.

The Quran's treatment of backbiting is part of a broader framework of speech ethics. The Quran commands truthfulness (9:119), prohibits falsehood (22:30), commands the avoidance of suspicion (49:12), prohibits spying (49:12), prohibits mockery (49:11), prohibits offensive name-calling (49:11), and prohibits backbiting (49:12). Together, these commands and prohibitions form a comprehensive system of tongue governance — the protection of the human being from the harm of the word.

The prohibition of backbiting is, at its core, the protection of the absent. The person who is not present to defend themselves is the person most vulnerable to the harm of the tongue. The Quran steps into their absence and speaks on their behalf: do not speak of your brother in a way that they would dislike. Do not eat their flesh. Do not consume their honor. The absent brother is protected by the command of the Present Witness — Allah, who sees what is spoken and hears what is whispered, and who will judge every word on the Day when all is revealed.

The first chapter begins with the prohibition itself — the verse that establishes the forbidding of backbiting and the image that makes the invisible harm

visible.

Chapter 1: The Prohibition — What Allah

Forbids

The prohibition of backbiting is established in a single, comprehensive verse:

O you who believe, avoid much suspicion. Indeed, some suspicion is sin. And do not spy or backbite one another. Would one of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would detest it. And fear Allah. Indeed, Allah is Accepting of Repentance and Merciful. (49:12)

The verse is the climax of a sequence of three verses in Surah al-Hujurat that govern social relations. The preceding verses prohibit mockery (49:11) and offensive name-calling (49:11). The final verse addresses the internal life (suspicion), the investigative life (spying), and the verbal life (backbiting). The three prohibitions are connected: suspicion leads to spying, spying leads to backbiting. The person who suspects their brother begins to investigate them, and the investigation produces the information that the backbiter shares. The Quran addresses the problem at every stage — the thought (suspicion), the action (spying), and the word (backbiting).

The Arabic word for backbiting is ghibah — from the root ghaba, meaning to be absent. Ghibah is the speaking of an absent person in a way that they would dislike. The Prophet defined it with precision: "Do you know what backbiting is?" They said: "Allah and His Messenger know best." He said: "It is to mention your brother in a way that he would dislike." It was asked: "What if what I say about him is true?" He said: "If what you say is true, you have backbitten him. And if it is not true, you have slandered him" (reported by Muslim). The definition is clear: ghibah is saying something about an absent person that they would not want said — whether true or false. If true, it is backbiting. If false, it is slander (buhtan) — a graver sin.

The Quran's image of eating the flesh of a dead brother is the most powerful anti-backbiting image in the Quran. The image works on multiple levels: (1) the visceral — eating the flesh of a human being is revolting, and eating the flesh of a dead human being is more revolting still. (2) The relational — the flesh is not the flesh of a stranger but of a brother, making the act a betrayal. (3) The legal — the person whose flesh is being eaten is dead, meaning they cannot defend themselves, which is the essential characteristic of the backbitten person. (4) The social — the act is done in the absence of the victim, just as backbiting is done in the absence of the person being spoken of.

The image makes the invisible harm visible. The backbiter does not see the harm of their words — the words seem light, casual, and harmless. The Quran gives them an image that cannot be ignored: you are eating the flesh of your dead brother. The image shocks the conscience and forces the question: would

I do this? And if I would not eat the flesh, why do I speak the words?

The verse begins with the command to avoid suspicion and then prohibits spying and backbiting. The order is significant: suspicion is the root, spying is the trunk, and backbiting is the fruit. The person who suspects their brother begins to look for evidence — to spy, to investigate, to gather information. The information that is gathered is then shared — and the sharing is the backbiting. The Quran addresses the problem at its root: if you do not suspect, you will not spy. If you do not spy, you will not have the information to share. If you do not have the information, you cannot backbite. The chain is broken at its first link.

The preceding verse (49:11) prohibits mockery and offensive name-calling: "O you who believe, let not a people ridicule another people. Perhaps they may be better than them. Nor let women ridicule other women. Perhaps they may be better than them. And do not insult one another by nicknames. Wretched is the name of wickedness after faith." The prohibition of mockery is the prohibition of the public form of the private vice. The backbiter mocks the absent; the scoffer mocks the present. Both are prohibited because both diminish the dignity of the person who is targeted. The Quran adds a principle: "Perhaps they may be better than them" — the person you mock may be superior to you in the sight of Allah. The mockery is not merely offensive; it is presumptuous — the assumption of superiority that the Quran rejects.

The verse ends with the command to fear Allah: "And fear Allah. Indeed, Allah is Accepting of Repentance and Merciful" (49:12). The command to fear Allah is placed after the prohibition of backbiting because the fear of Allah is the restraint that prevents the tongue. The person who fears Allah will not backbite — because they know that Allah hears every word, that every word is recorded, and that every word will be judged. The person who does not fear Allah will backbite freely — because they believe that their words are private, that no one is listening, and that there are no consequences. The fear of Allah is the consciousness that every word is spoken in the presence of the One who hears all.

The verse ends with mercy: "Indeed, Allah is Accepting of Repentance and Merciful" (49:12). The mercy after the warning is the Quran's constant pattern: the prohibition is severe, but the door of repentance is open. The person who has backbitten can repent — can stop, can seek forgiveness, can make amends. The mercy is not a license to backbite but an invitation to return. The person who has eaten the flesh of their brother can stop eating, can seek the forgiveness of Allah, and can be received by the One who is Accepting of Repentance and Merciful.

Surah al-Hujurat — the chapter of the Rooms — is the Quran's manual of social ethics. The surah addresses: the etiquette of interacting with the Prophet (49:1-5), the prohibition of spreading unverified news (49:6), the prohibition of mockery and offensive name-calling (49:11), and the prohibition of suspicion, spying, and backbiting (49:12). The surah is a comprehensive framework for the governance of social behavior — the protection of the community from the internal harms that destroy it from within. The prohibition of backbiting, placed at the climax of the surah, is the capstone of the social ethics that the surah establishes.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aira Aurora is an independent researcher and writer specializing in Quranic studies. Her work focuses on close reading of the Quranic text, exploring its themes, narratives, and moral framework with attention to both the original Arabic and the broader human context.

The NurOne master series is her primary project -- a multi-sub-series exploration of the Quran covering prophets, people, places, events, lessons, commands, signs, the unseen, the hereafter, and everyday life. Each book is a close reading of the Quranic verses on a specific topic, presented in clear, accessible language.

Her work is published under the pen name Aira Aurora.

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