SAMPLE

The Prohibition of Intoxicants: The Loss

of Reason Khamr (خمر) in the Quran

Aira Aurora

Free sample: Introduction & Chapter 1

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Introduction: The Hand of Shaytan

The prohibition of intoxicants in the Quran is unique among the divine prohibitions for the way it was revealed — not all at once, but in stages. The Quran did not begin by forbidding wine; it began by acknowledging its appeal, then by revealing its harm, then by commanding the believers to abstain. The gradual revelation reflects the depth of the practice in pre- Islamic society and the wisdom of the divine pedagogy — weaning a community from a deeply rooted habit rather than tearing it away in a single stroke.

The final prohibition is stated in absolute terms: "O you who believe, indeed, intoxicants and gambling and stone altars and divining arrows are an abomination of the work of Shaytan, so avoid it that you may be successful. Shaytan only wants to cause between you animosity and hatred through intoxicants and gambling and to avert you from the remembrance of Allah and from prayer. So will you not desist?" (5:90-91). These two verses are the final word on intoxicants in the Quran — the definitive prohibition that closes the gradual process and establishes the forbidding as a permanent command.

This book — the seventh in the Commands & Prohibitions sub-series — explores the Quranic prohibition of intoxicants. It examines the gradual prohibition (from 4:43 to 2:219 to 5:90-91), the theological foundation (reason as the divine gift), the nature of intoxication (the loss of the self), the social harm (the hand of Shaytan — animosity, hatred, the averting from remembrance), the prophetic models of sobriety, the psychology of the hypocrite who returns to the cup, the Quranic alternative (remembrance and prayer), the specific prohibitions, and the spiritual reward of the pure.

The Quran's treatment of intoxicants is not merely about a substance; it is about the faculty that the substance destroys. The Arabic word for intoxicant — khamr — comes from a root meaning to cover, to conceal. Intoxication covers the mind — it conceals the reason, hides the judgment, and veils the consciousness that Allah has given to the human being as the faculty of moral discernment. The prohibition of khamr is, at its deepest level, the protection of reason — the divine gift that distinguishes the human being from the animal and that enables the worship, the obedience, and the moral life that Allah has commanded.

The first chapter begins with the gradual prohibition — the three stages of revelation that moved the Muslim community from the acknowledgment of wine's appeal to its complete prohibition.

Chapter 1: The Gradual Prohibition — From

Permission to Prohibition

The first verse revealed about intoxicants was not a prohibition but an acknowledgment: "They ask you about wine and gambling. Say: In them is great sin and benefit for people. But the sin is greater than the benefit" (2:219). The verse acknowledges what the people already knew — that wine and gambling had both benefits and harms — and it establishes the principle that the divine judgment is based on the comparison: the sin is greater than the benefit. The verse does not prohibit; it educates. It teaches the believers to weigh the harm against the benefit and to recognize that, in the divine accounting, the harm exceeds the benefit.

The first stage is pedagogical. The Quran does not simply say "no" — it explains why. The believer who understands that the sin is greater than the benefit is being prepared for the next stage — the restriction and, eventually, the prohibition. The gradual approach respects the hold that wine had on the community: the Arabs of pre-Islamic society drank widely, drank at celebrations, drank at gatherings, and drank as a normal part of social life. The prohibition could not come all at once without causing hardship. The Quran begins by planting the seed of doubt — the recognition that the harm is greater — and then builds on that seed through subsequent revelations.

The second verse restricted the use of wine in specific circumstances: "O you who believe, do not approach prayer while you are intoxicated until you know what you are saying" (4:43). The verse does not prohibit wine entirely but prohibits it at the times of prayer — the believer who is intoxicated may not approach the prayer until the intoxication has passed and they know what they are saying. The restriction is significant: it places the prayer above the wine, the remembrance above the intoxication. The believer who wants to pray must be sober. The believer who wants to drink must wait until after the prayer. The practical effect of the restriction was to limit the times when drinking was permissible — and since the prayer times are spread throughout the day, the restriction significantly narrowed the window.

The second stage is transitional. The believer who is told not to approach prayer while intoxicated begins to see the conflict between the two activities — the worship that requires clarity and the drinking that produces cloudiness. The conflict is not merely practical but spiritual: the person who is intoxicated cannot remember Allah properly, cannot recite the Quran with understanding, cannot stand before their Lord with the fullness of their consciousness. The restriction is the beginning of the choice — prayer or wine, remembrance or intoxication — and the Quran is preparing the believer to make the right choice.

The final stage is the absolute prohibition: "O you who believe, indeed, intoxicants and gambling and stone altars and divining arrows are an abomination of the work of Shaytan, so avoid it that you may be successful. Shaytan only wants to cause between you animosity and hatred through intoxicants and gambling and to avert you from the remembrance of Allah and from prayer. So will you not desist?" (5:90-91). The prohibition is comprehensive: all intoxicants, all gambling, all forms of pagan divination are forbidden — not as individual rules but as a single category: the abomination of the work of Shaytan.

The third stage is definitive. The gradual process — acknowledgment, restriction, prohibition — is complete. The believer who has followed the process from stage to stage has been prepared for the final command: avoid it. The word ijtanibu — avoid, shun, keep away from — is stronger than "do not do." It means: do not go near it, do not approach it, do not put yourself in its path. The believer is not merely told not to drink; they are told to avoid the very vicinity of intoxicants — the places, the gatherings, the company where intoxicants are present.

The final prohibition groups intoxicants with three other practices: gambling (maysir), stone altars (ansab), and divining arrows (azlam). The grouping is significant: all four are practices of pre-Islamic Arabian society that are associated with the worship of other than Allah. Wine and gambling were the entertainment of the pagan gatherings; the stone altars were the sites of pagan sacrifice; the divining arrows were the tools of pagan divination. The grouping reveals that intoxicants are not merely a personal vice but a cultural practice connected to a way of life that the Quran is replacing — the way of jahiliyyah (ignorance) with the way of Islam.

The gradual prohibition of intoxicants is often cited as an example of the Quran's pedagogical wisdom. A sudden prohibition would have been difficult for a community in which drinking was deeply embedded. The gradual approach — first acknowledging the harm, then restricting the practice, then prohibiting it entirely — gave the believers time to adjust, to internalize the principle, and to make the choice willingly. The wisdom of the gradual approach is the wisdom of a teacher who knows that lasting change comes not from a single command but from a process of education, reflection, and voluntary commitment.

When the final prohibition was revealed, the companions of the Prophet responded immediately. Those who had wine in their cups poured them out. Those who had wine in their homes spilled it in the streets. The response was not reluctant obedience but enthusiastic compliance — the believers had been

prepared by the gradual process, and when the final command came, they embraced it. The streets of Madinah flowed with wine that day — not because the people were forced to pour it but because they had been educated to see it as an abomination, and they wanted to be rid of it. The response is the proof of the wisdom of the gradual approach: a community that was prepared became a community that willingly abandoned a deeply rooted practice.

The gradual prohibition must be understood in the context of the society in which it was revealed. The Arabs of pre-Islamic society were not merely casual drinkers — wine was woven into the fabric of their social life. Poetry was composed over wine, friendships were sealed over wine, and celebrations were centered around wine. The drinking gathering was a social institution — the place where men came together, where news was shared, where bonds were formed. To prohibit wine in one stroke would have been like prohibiting the social gathering itself — it would have torn the fabric of a society that had no alternative structure. The gradual approach gave the community time to build the alternative — the masjid as the center of social life, the prayer as the rhythm of the day, and the remembrance of Allah as the basis of gathering. The prohibition did not merely remove a substance; it replaced a way of life.

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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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