

**“NOBLE MORALITY”: THE 18TH ḤADĪTH OF IMAM AN-NAWAWI’S
COLLECTION AS A STRATEGY FOR CHANGE IN NIGERIA**

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URL: <http://ijourels.org.ng> <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijrs.v7i1.1>

Abstract

Change is a constant variable in any society. Nigerians of recent have been inundated with the change mantra most especially in the political terrain. The reason is not far from the fact that the country is currently undergoing unprecedented turbulence which requires urgent attention for the populace to be ready for the change. The paper addressed the wrong perception among masses that consider the idea of “change” as meaning change from one ruling party to another in government only instead of a more comprehensive outlook of change which entails people in government changing their attitudes for better. This paper proposes a strategy for change in Nigeria from an Islamic perspective. The methodology is analytical in nature drawing evidence primarily from the Ḥadīth (sayings of Prophet Muhammad), Qur’ān and *Sīrah* (Islamic history). This serves as a strong theoretical basis for the strategy for change and the expected result. The paper suggests that noble morality as enjoined in the 18th Ḥadīth of An-Nawawi presents the best strategy for change in Nigeria. The Ḥadīth encourages fear of God wherever one finds oneself, to follow-up an evil deed with a good one, and to behave good-naturedly towards people. These will lead to a positive effect in one’s relation with the Divine, to oneself, as well as to others. This study concludes that a good strategy for change is to focus on individual transformation for better. In other words, all hands from top to bottom must be on deck to attain the desired change in the country.

Keywords: Morality, Hadith, An-Nawawi, Change, Nigeria

Introduction

Morality in the ordinary sense is the principle concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour. Noble morality on the other hand refers to truthfulness, compassion and valour expressed in distinguishing between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour. This is why noble morality from an ethical point of view has been linked to truthfulness and valour.¹ From a philosophical angle, it is seen as a social role,² and part of a physician skill that should be possessed alongside compassion.³ It has also been described as a moral capital that should be developed.⁴ Noble morality is also seen as an inner motivation that should be pursued with “the sense of rights and responsibilities in

moral choice, and the ability to make independent moral choices, self-confidence, and personal dignity” leading to a moral personality.⁵

In Nigeria, the emphasis on “change” as change from one ruling party to another in the governance of the country (especially during the 2015 elections), shows the lack of holistic understanding of change among the populace. However, there is no doubt that a more comprehensive type of change can only be achieved through a strong moral force and a Spartan discipline. That is why, some writers have explained the need to bring about change in the country by fighting corruption, terrorism, and most importantly, begin to reconstruct the values of a people gone astray.⁶

In Islam, the Qur’ān and the sunnah are the main sources of guidance for Muslims in particular and the entire humanity in general. With particular reference to change, the Qur’an says for instance: “Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves. And when Allah intends for a people ill, there is no repelling it. And there is not for them besides Him any patron”(Suratul Rad, 11).The sunnah comprises of Prophet Muhammad’s statements, deeds, and tacit approval. Perhaps, the most important of the three aspects are his statements. These statements have been properly documented in the authentic Ḥadīth literature, an example of which is Imam an-Nawawi’s collections of forty Ḥadīth.⁷

Among an-Nawawi’s collections in his forty *Ḥadīth* is the 18th Ḥadīth wherein the Prophet gives some advice to his companions which have far-reaching implications. The advice given by the Prophet if well implemented has the potentiality to bring about societal change in respect of the individual changing for better. The Ḥadīth covers the rights of God over an individual, rights of an individual over himself, and rights of other people over a person.⁸ This means that the statement of the Prophet is a comprehensive piece of advice and it has the ability to transform an individual as well as the society if sincerely applied. It is also important to state that the attitudes of Muslims during the early caliphal period, that is, after the demise of the Prophet, were the human living of a *ḥadīth* especially this particular one in focus.

Against this backdrop, this study attempts to address the on-going campaign to ‘change’ the situation of the country for better. On the basis of the current status and situation of the country, this article indicates the urgent need for change in Nigeria and clearly identifies the characteristics of the change mantra in Nigeria. The article describes how central the idea of noble morality is to the change agenda in Nigeria through highlighting the concept of change in the 18th Ḥadīth of an-Nawawi’s Collection. It also analyzes the possible impact of using the 18th Ḥadīth of an-Nawawi’s collection as a strategy for change in Nigeria.

Noble Morality

The concept of morality appears to be universal, although there is also the view that the Divine Creator might have handed us the universal bits at the

moment of creation. To the biologists and geologists, human morality appears to have evolved over millions of years generating intuitions about right and wrong along the way.⁹ The idea of morality is also linked to obligation and aspiration.¹⁰ Obligation, in the sense that moralities of custom and habits are seen as useful instruments of social cohesion for small societies, the family, the tribe, even the nation. The clusters of habit are then taken by an individual with a sense of duty in order to keep societies stable and to keep them relatively fixed. Aspiration in relation to morality connotes the vision of some ideal which beckons the individual on to previously unexampled tone of moral feeling, which opens a new avenue of action that may found a new form of morals leading to something worthy to be described as noble.¹¹

The idea of noble morality was mentioned alongside excellent skills, reasonable structure, full vigour and high quality.¹² Noble morality was also placed side by side with high-level wisdom while discussing a complete development of personality.¹³ This is to show that noble morality is an important ingredient in changing a personality for better.

Noble morality is also listed among the characteristics that should be found in officers in charge of operation command.¹⁴ This is mentioned along the line of other qualities such as profound knowledge, stable emotion, strong will, good character, and excellent strategy. This indicates the understanding that noble morality is an important concept that needs to be developed in order to have a positive impact in a field or area individuals find themselves.

Change Mantra in Nigeria

From 1999 to 2015, Nigeria has had 16 uninterrupted years of democracy with the People's Democratic Party (PDP) as the ruling party controlling the majority of the states. In 2015 general elections, the All Progressives Congress (APC) which was an opposition party defeated the ruling party. This effectively put APC in charge at both the center and majority of the states of the federation. The APC got many of the populace on their side largely based on the campaign slogan of 'change'. The idea of change that the people clamored for and on the basis of which they supported the party is to end maladministration, insecurity, injustice, impunity and corruption in the affairs of the nation and bring about social progress, justice, popular empowerment as well as development.¹⁵ Yet, there are others who limit their idea of change to mean change in ruling government of that time.

There have been various suggestions as to how to bring about the desired change. Some researchers suggest the need to rally around civil societies as a platform for mobilization of Nigerians and for the enthronement of democracy, empowerment, and development since imperial financiers are seen as the major enemies of the people and the country.¹⁶ Also, suggestions have been made to institute credible change in the governance paradigm and to reconfigure the national ethical plane of the people.¹⁷

Furthermore, from the March 2015 elections, the need for a clearly defined national normative and ethical imperative against historic impediments that have militated against the Nigerian sense of nationhood emerged. It may be inferred that the power transition was largely seen as a change from a destructive elite constituency to a more progressive ethical political class.¹⁸ The new ruling party declared during campaigns its readiness to dismantle the regime of corruption that has taken root in the country. This made the current president, Muhammadu Buhari, to state that his main goal is to stop corruption and make the ordinary people, the weak and the vulnerable, the new top priority.¹⁹ Nigerians are waiting to see the extent to which the promises will be fulfilled.

However, there is need for the government not to focus all its attention on the political dimension and physical development concerning the change mantra, rather attention must be shifted to how challenges facing the nation can be addressed within the framework of ethical values for the good of the people, that is where real and long lasting change can be made. Therefore, the stakes in the ‘change’ calculus are high and the management of the process of dismantling the protocols of Nigeria’s national debauchery deriving from its nebulous political settlement should be done away with.²⁰

Given the importance of an ethical dimension of the change sought by the state and the populace as well as in the corporate world, it should be understood as a struggle to create an enabling space to attempt a better restructuring of the normative and ethical fundamentals that impel the appalling state of daily life in the country. The ethical dimension of change is also an attempt to employ smart strategies to ring-fence and protect the fragile condition of the society against an expansive and destructive ethical and normative environment, all too capable of imploding Nigeria.

The 18th Ḥadīth of An-Nawawi’s Collection

Ḥadīth 18 of Imam an-Nawawi’s collection of *Forty Ḥadīth* states:

عَنْ أَبِي ذَرِّ جُنْدُبِ بْنِ جُنَادَةَ وَأَبِي عَبْدِ الرَّحْمَنِ مُعَاذِ
بْنِ جَبَلٍ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمَا عَنْ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ
وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ: اتَّقِ اللَّهَ حَيْثُمَا كُنْتَ وَأَتَّبِعِ السَّبِيَّةَ الْحَسَنَةَ
تَمَحُّهَا وَخَالِقِ النَّاسَ بِخُلُقِ حَسَنٍ. رَوَاهُ التِّرْمِذِيُّ،
وَقَالَ: حَدِيثٌ حَسَنٌ. وَفِي بَعْضِ النُّسخِ حَسَنٌ
صَحِيحٌ.

On the authority of Abu Dharr Jundub ibn Junada and Abu Abdul Rahmaan Muaadh ibn Jabal (may Allah be pleased with both of them) from the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) who said, ‘Fear Allah wherever you are. And follow up a bad deed with a good deed and it will wipe it out. And behave towards the people with a good behaviour.’ Recorded by al-Tirmidhi who said it is

a Hasan Ḥadīth. And in some of the copies [of Sunan al-Tirmidhi, it says it is] Hasan Sahih.²¹

In this Ḥadīth, Prophet Muhammad urges that one must fear or protect oneself from God's anger and punishment. This, it should be understood, is a negative thing that one must protect oneself from. God's anger is the source of a person experiencing His punishment in both this world and the afterlife. Therefore, efforts must be made to avoid and protect one-self from earning the anger of God. This can be done by being sincere to God by obeying what He has ordered and staying away from what He has prohibited. This is basically what is meant by fearing or respecting God.

The second portion of the advice of the Prophet states, "And follow up a bad deed with a good deed and it will wipe it out". This shows even those who have fear or respect for God may, at times, do wrong deeds or things they are not so proud of, since fear or respect for God does not necessarily translate to perfection. However, one is not expected to persist in wrong doings. When one discovers or notices or even remembers that what one is doing is a misdeed, an attempt should be made to revert to the normal step and then follow up the misdeed with a good deed. This is in line with the Prophet's statement. The Qur'ān, for instance, explains thus:

And be quick in the race for forgiveness from your Lord and for Paradise as wide as the heavens and the earth, prepared for the muttaqeen: Those who spend [for Allah's cause] in prosperity and in adversity, who repress anger, and who pardon men. Verily, Allah loves the doers of good. And those who, when they have committed some evil or wronged themselves, remember Allah and ask forgiveness for their sins--and who can forgive sins except Allah—and who do not persist in what [wrong] they have done, while they know. For such, the reward is forgiveness from their Lord, and Gardens with rivers flowing amidst them, wherein they shall abide forever. How excellent is this reward for the doers [of taqwa] (Suratul Imran 3:133-136)

In addition, the idea of "good deeds" in the Ḥadīth is understood to mean repentance from the misdeed that was done. Sincere repentance can indeed wipe out major or minor misdeeds.²² This can be seen as a situation where one feels sad for one's misdeed and thereby resolves never to do such act or misdeed again. If the act involves the violation of someone else's right, one restores that person's right.

The third part of the Prophet advice declares "And behave toward the people with a good behaviour". This means that one should deal with and interact with others in a good manner. Interacting with others in a good manner includes being calm and nice towards them and having pleasant expression and smile when one greets them and not having a bad thought about them. The main point here is to treat others in the manner one would want to be treated. In addition, the Prophet advises that one should behave or have a certain behaviour which shows

that one can change and determine one's behaviour. This means that if one has a good behaviour, one should continue in it to the extent that it comes natural and if one has a bad character one should endeavour to change the character.

Examples of Internalisation of the Ḥadīth Teachings among the Early Muslims in the Golden Generation of Islam

It will suffice to discuss in this section the understanding and practice of the teachings of this Ḥadīth by the Prophet and the *Khulafahu Rashidun* (rightly guided caliphs) in the past.²³ The Prophet preached the divine message and also lived it. This is why he is being regarded as a model for humanity, and so also are those who readily responded to the message of the Prophet with the utmost alacrity. They listened to what the Prophet said. They acted as he instructed and practiced what he showed to them. After the demise of the Prophet, they served and saved the faith with their deeds and practices, characters and conducts.²⁴

There are volumes of works written about the characteristics of the Prophet such as his simplicity, austerity, modesty, his sense of equity, how he was thoughtful towards women and children and there are more as saw by his companions and transmitted through various ḥadīth. His farewell speech at the culmination of his last journey to Makkah is of recorded importance, which contains the quintessence of his main goal. Among what he said is:

Remember, one day you will appear before Allah and answer your deeds. So beware, do not stray from the path of righteousness after I am gone. All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety (taqwa) and good action.²⁵

Thus began a ‘change’ in the history of humankind. After the demise of the Prophet, ‘A’isha, the wife of the Prophet, was asked about the character of the Prophet, she said: “His moral was the Qur’ān itself”, meaning that the moral qualities mentioned in the Qur’ān and the injunctions revealed by divine command, were all harmonised in his person. ‘A’isha also said that “Allah’s Messenger never took revenge for himself unless the things made inviolate by Allah were violated; he then took revenge for Allah”.²⁶

Also, one of the foremost amongst the *Khulafahu Rashidun* was Abu Bakr As-Siddiq. It was stated that the day after he became the leader of the Muslims, he was seen going to the market with two sheets. He was then advised to leave the business since he had become the leader of the Muslims. Abu Bakr responded thus, “From where will my wife and children and myself eat?” The matter was later settled that someone should be appointed as the collector of his allowance.²⁷ Abu Bakr categorically said to the person appointed as a collector:

Collect from the Muhājirin a maintenance allowance for me and my wife and children. Everything should be very ordinary. Garments for summer and winter will be needed and they are to be returned when worn out before the demand for new ones are made.²⁸

Also, this was why at the point of death he could say to his daughter (Aishah):

I was only benefited from the service done to the Muslims by eating and wearing whatever rough and coarse clothes were available. I have nothing of the public funds with me except a slave, dromedary, and an old sheet. Send all of these to Umar when I am no more.²⁹

Earlier, upon his appointment as the Caliph, he addressed the people – after praising and glorifying Allah – thus:

I have been chosen as your chief although I am better than none of you. Thus, if I do good work it is incumbent on you to extend your help and support to me; if I go wrong it is your duty to put me on the right path. Truth and righteousness are a trust and untruth is a breach of trust. The weak among you are strong to me unless I give them full justice, and the strong among you are weak to me unless I receive what is due from them. Abandon not *Jihād*, when the people hold back from *Jihād*, they are put to disgrace. Obey me while I keep obeying Allāh and His Messenger; renounce me when I disobey Allah and His Messenger, for obedience to me is not incumbent on you then.³⁰

Another exemplary leader among the Rightly-Guided Caliphs is ‘Umar bin Al-Khattāb. He was appointed the leader of the Muslims after the death of Abu Bakr and upon consultation with the leading companions of the Prophet. After assumption of office as the Caliph he addressed the Muslims who had assembled in the Prophet’s mosque thus:

After Hadrat Abu Bakr, the mantle of Khalifat has fallen on my shoulders. I swear it before God that I never coveted this office. I wished that it would have devolved on some other person more worthy than me. But now that in national interest, the responsibility for leading the Muslims has come to vest in me, I assure you that I will not run away from my post, and will make an earnest effort to discharge the onerous duties of the office to the best of my capacity in accordance with the injunctions of Islam. In the performance of my duties, I will seek guidance from the Holy Book and will follow the examples set by the Holy Prophet and Hadrat Abu Bakr. In this task, I seek your assistance. If I follow the right path, follow me. If I deviate from the right path, correct me so that we are not led astray.³¹

After he became the leader, ‘Umar soon realized that he was more feared than loved, his predecessor (Abu Bakr) was known as a tender and soft hearted person. Whenever he (Abu Bakr) appeared in the streets of Madinah, the children ran to him saying “Father, Father” and he caressed and patted them. However, when ‘Umar became the Caliph, the children would run away upon sighting him.³² This was because ‘Umar was known for his stern nature among the populace. That was why on the occasion of the first Friday prayer after his assumption of office, ‘Umar used the opportunity to address the populace on

reasons for his hard and stern countenance. He informed them that his stern nature was out of service for the two leaders (the Prophet & Abu Bakr) of the Muslims, he was more of a naked sword for them to use whenever necessary. However, now that the responsibility of leading the populace is on his shoulders, he assured them stating that:

Know ye brethren that you will feel a change in me. I will no longer be hard and stern in all matters. For those who practice tyranny and deprive others of their rights, I will be harsh and stern, but for those who follow the law, and are devoted to religion, I will be soft and tender. I will not tolerate any person make any excess. He who commits any tyranny, him I will sternly call to book. I will be a pillar of strength for the weak and the meek. They will find in me their best friend. Friends, you have some rights on me, and I tell you of these rights so that you may be in a position to call me to account. These rights are: Firstly, that I should not exact any tax or other levy from you not authorised by law; secondly, that whatever taxes are lawfully realized from you are spent in your best interests; thirdly, it is incumbent on me that I should protect the frontiers of your land; fourthly, it is my duty to promote your prosperity and look after your interests; and fifthly, it is my obligation to do justice.³³

It is important to state here that the periods of Abu Bakr and ‘Umar can be regarded as the era of religious and spiritual rule of Islam during the Rightly-Guided Caliphate. Among the many characteristics of their period is domination of Faith over the material world.³⁴ Personal interests, relationships, and friendships were not allowed to influence their discharge of duties. Many of the populace can be said to have been brought up under the loving care and spiritual guidance of the Prophet which was continued by the two leaders. This was why Abu Bakr and ‘Umar were held in high esteem by everyone and they, in turn, worked as torchbearers. Also, there was no trace of disunity and discord among the populace because the leaders were known for their piety, purity, simplicity and honesty.³⁵ These few instances, therefore, constitute the basis upon which the Ḥadīth is recommended for adoption by Nigerians. In other words, there is the need to internalise the teachings of the Ḥadīth just like the early Muslims in the golden generation of Islam.

The 18th Ḥadīth as a Strategy for Change in Nigeria

The 18th Ḥadīth of An-Nawawi *Forty Ḥadīth* can be described as a means of achieving change in areas of maladministration, insecurity, injustice, impunity and corruption in the affairs of the nation. If individuals take up the tasks of implementing the three-fold piece of advice of the Prophet as stated in the 18th Ḥadīth, the country can begin to experience social progress, justice, economic empowerment as well as development. The implication of utilizing the 18th Ḥadīth is that a person who fears God when he or she is with others as well as when he or she is all alone can better serve the people and the country better.

This is because the individual recognizes that God knows everything that everyone does as well as what anyone even harbours in his or her heart. This makes the individual cautious of his or her actions and in all circumstances, the person would like to be in his or her best behaviour and try as much as possible to avoid what might displease God. The Qur'ān says, "Fear Allah through Whom you demand your mutual (rights) and [do not cut off the ties of] the womb. Surely, Allah is ever an All-Watcher over you" (Suratul Nisai 4:1).

A person who understands this would be in a better position to bring about the change from mal-administration to good governance, from injustice to justice and from corruption to honesty. This is because of the realization that God sees him or her at all times and knows what he or she does in secret. A situation like this motivates individuals and people to avoid committing sins even when in complete privacy. In addition, the idea of fearing God or respecting God wherever one finds oneself is that it includes whether one finds oneself with pious or impious people, one must still act appropriately since it is not the people that should be feared or even respected but God Himself. Therefore, the person must tend to himself and cannot use others as an excuse for disobeying God.³⁶

The desired change will also be witnessed by implementing the second phase of the advice as contained in the 18th Hadīth because following up an evil deed with a good deed gives an individual the opportunity to exhibit goodness to rectify situation(s) that could have been made worse by doing otherwise. The idea of following up with good deeds can be achieved by spending one's wealth, repelling one's anger, as well as forgiving people who might have wronged one. Furthermore, even though an individual has committed a misdeed, the second phase of the advice will not make one persist in wrongdoing because it instills in one the willingness to make a change. In other words, instead of following an evil deed with more evil (which may sometimes be the result of thinking that what one has done cannot be rectified) one is urged to do good through remembering God after doing such act and ask God for forgiveness and repent to Him from that deed, as repentance is to avoid being persistent in a deed. To remember God is to remember His greatness and the harshness of His punishment and retribution. It also includes remembering what He has promised as a punishment for evil deeds. This motivates one to come back from a low state and stop the continuation of a misdeed and energized for a nobler act invariably leading to change.

The third advice about behaving towards the people with good behaviour has implication as regards change because having good morals and manners toward one's neighbours, friends, enemies, wives and even animals will ensure peaceful co-existence which will inspire development. In doing this, one moves closer to having a noble character that is worthy of emulation. It is also important to state here that good manners do not necessarily mean that one should accept everything that everyone else does and continue to regard them as the same. For instance, some might think that they have good morals and character and accept evil acts of others that negatively affect the general public and they never try to

correct others seeing it as impolite behaviour. In other words, any act not in tandem with what is acceptable to God should not be accepted from others as constituting good manners. One should not be silent if the acts that will have negative consequences on the society are committed or about to be committed. Indeed, one should express one’s displeasure towards such an unbecoming act in an unequivocal manner. Therefore, not speaking out in the presence of wrong is not a part of correct behaviour. It is only the confused minds that would think that such is good and nice behaviour. In other words, a good manner and character towards others presupposes that one should advise people when they are wrong. It is to show in a kind manner what they are doing is wrong and not proper and that it is not acceptable. The thrust of the argument here is that one should behave with people in a good manner and one should behave towards them in a manner that he likes for them to behave towards him. This will essentially bring about positive change in the society.

Conclusion

This study discusses the idea of change by exploring the noble approach enjoined on Muslims in the 18th Ḥadīth of Imam an-Nawawi’s *Forty Ḥadīth*. The advice of the Prophet as found in this Ḥadīth has the implication for bringing about positive change in the society. Consequently, the change that could be witnessed in following this advice as contained in the Ḥadīth are that it can lead to good end;³⁷ serves as guidance to do the right thing;³⁸ leads to special closeness, help and support;³⁹ spreads loyalty, protection against evil;⁴⁰ spreads love;⁴¹ serves as a criterion to distinguish right from wrong, good from bad and what is beneficial from what is harmful;⁴² leads to beneficial solutions and ways out from difficulty and confusion;⁴³ a way out of situations from avenues that one did not even imagine;⁴⁴ matters become easy;⁴⁵ rewards become greater;⁴⁶ one’s deeds become easily accepted (i.e. one’s deeds are easily seen from a positive angle;⁴⁷ well-wishing spreads and fear and grief begins to disappear which will invariably herald a period of change in the society.

The ‘change’ mantra should not be mere rhetoric, but seen as a required physical and spiritual systemic change that takes into consideration nation-wide and individual discipline and fight against dysfunctional system in order to address the real change that is needed. It must, however, be noted that the change of government is merely a means to an end. Therefore, a more definite level is the level of personal effort for change every individual is willing to make and this is not unconnected with the level of one’s relationship with the Divine Creator, oneself as well as other people around one, which has been pointed out in the 18th Ḥadīth of Imam an-Nawawi’s *Forty Ḥadīth*.

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- 20 For instance, the “change begins with me” slogan of Buhari’s government has been criticized. People have asked to what extent has change began with Buhari, if he takes even earache to London hospital, and the Aso Rock Villa clinic is in a state of mess? When he protects the Acting Chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, Ibrahim Magu, against accountability to the Senate? Also, the signing NNPC contract in his sick bed in London as well as the ongoing Boko Haram’s abductions, suicide bombings and struggles with the Nigerian Army, at least those are some of the controversial issues that surround him till date.
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- 28 Najeebabadi; Mubārakfūrī; Ṣafī al-Raḥmān; Abdullah, & Salafī, 271. *Muhājirin* in the quote refers to those who migrated from Makkah to Madinah during the life time of the Prophet.
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- 44 Sūratul *Talāq*, 2.
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