Prohibition of Alcohol; Analyzing the Intoxicant

From Tafseer Imdad-ul-Karam by Shaykh Muhammad Imdad Hussain Pirzada, April 2004

Qur’an; Verse 219 of Surat al-Baqarah

“They ask you about wine and gambling. Say (to them) ‘there is much harm in these two…” (Qur’an 2, 219)

_Khamr_ refers to all such substances that intoxicate and cause unconsciousness. _Maysir_ refers to all types of gambling. Gambling is based upon the possibility of one person effortlessly making immense financial gain, whilst other less fortunate ones lose their life earnings. Thereafter, they are compelled to beg for survival or turn to crime to sustain themselves.

The Arabs used to consume alcohol in great amounts and therefore prohibiting it would always be hugely problematic. Islam sought to outlaw alcohol in stages rather than to ban it in one go. The first divine revelation was aimed at creating hatred for alcohol, so it could prepare people to abandon it altogether. The background behind this verse was that ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab, Ma‘adh ibn Jabal and other companions (May Allah be pleased with them) came to the Dear Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and said that alcohol has adverse effects on the mind and is a waste of money, and they were eager to know what Islam’s stance was on alcohol (_Tafsir Ruh al-Ma’ani_). The Qur’an stated that both alcohol and gambling are harmful. Though they do sometimes lead to temporary gain, but they cause more pain and grief in the long run, and lead to religious and worldly loss. When this verse was revealed, some Muslims gave up drinking immediately.

Later, the Muslims were once performing prayer just after drinking alcohol. The Imam, under the influence of alcohol, recited the Qur’an so incorrectly that in normal, sober circumstances, this would have been apostasy if he had recited the Qur’an likewise. Thus, the second order concerning alcohol was revealed where Allah ordered the Muslims not to perform prayer while they were under the influence of alcohol. (Qur’an 4, 43) After this, the companions seldom drank alcohol.

Then on one occasion, alcohol was available in a gathering. Some drunkards there started a fight in which many people were physically hurt. (_Sahih Muslim_) When this incident was reported to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), the final divine order regarding alcohol was revealed. The Qur’an affirmed that alcohol was impure and the work of the devil, and that Muslims should abhor it. (Qur’an 5, 90) When this final verse was revealed, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) ordered the Muslims to announce the prohibition of alcohol in the streets of Madinah. The effects were immediate: whoever was drinking at the time threw their glasses down in disgust. In the homes, containers and jars of alcohol were smashed and soon, the gutters of Madinah were overflowing with discarded alcohol (_Tafsir Qurtubi_).

Nowhere in human history can we find an example of sincere obedience and adherence to match the way the companions of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) submitted to the orders of the Qur’an and Sunnah. The Encyclopaedia Britannica reinforces this fact:

‘Quite a different kind of religious control was adopted in the 7th century in Islam: The Qur’an simply condemned wine, and the result was an
effective prohibition wherever the devout followers of Muhammad in Arabia and other lands prevailed.’ (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 15th edition, 1995)

It is worth comparing this with the attempts made by the United States and other countries to ban alcohol;

‘Governmental efforts to control alcoholic beverages go back as far as recorded history. The laws often failed to produce the desired effects. The most resounding failure was that in the United States from 1919 to 1933.’ (ibid.)

A person only receives a false sense of temporary peace and tranquillity from drinking alcohol. For a short while, it eases his tiredness and troubles but its long-term adverse affects are well documented. A drunkard’s speech becomes blurred and meaningless. His actions cause havoc and chaos. At home, a drunkard will find it difficult to tell the difference between his wife and daughter and in public, his behaviour becomes rowdy and reckless. A driver under the influence of alcohol is a serious threat to the safety of other drivers and pedestrians. An alcoholic sometimes resorts to crime to feed his habit. In short, alcohol turns humans into mindless beasts, and even the most horrific behaviour becomes possible with it. The Encyclopaedia Britannica has amply highlighted the individual and social harm of alcohol. An alcoholic not only causes himself physical and financial harm, but he becomes an immense burden upon his family and the state. Islam, the religion of peace and harmony, therefore does not tolerate such a satanic and vile beverage. The Shari‘ah is crystal clear in prohibiting alcohol: The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, ‘Every intoxicant is khamr and every khamr is Haram (unlawful).’ (Sahih Muslim)

From this Hadith Islamic jurists have deduced that the widespread menace of drugs, that is plaguing the world, which cause a person to lose control of his senses, are also prohibited and come under the same rulings as alcohol.

On one occasion, I was invited to deliver a speech at Windsor College near London. During the questions and answers session, a Christian woman asked me why Islam did not permit alcohol. I asked her why in the United Kingdom, drinking alcohol is generally permitted, but under its influence, a person is not allowed to drive. She replied that a driver is responsible for his own safe being as well as of passengers, pedestrians and other road users, and when a person has drank alcohol he cannot always carry out this responsibility. I told her that she may think a person is only responsible when he drives a vehicle, but according to Islam, a person should be responsible at all times and places whether he is at home, in the public, in a car or in college. Not content with this answer, the woman said that when a person is asleep at night, he carries no external responsibility, so why aren’t Muslims allowed to drink then? I asked her to consider what she would do if she fell asleep drunk and an hour later, her house - God forbid - caught fire. If she were sober then she would smell the smoke or feel the heat of the fire and then quickly raise the alarm. But if she were drunk, she would not be able to act swiftly at all. The engulfing flames would soon threaten her life, the life of her children and the house. Upon hearing this, the woman stood up in front of everyone and admitted that Islam’s position on alcohol makes perfect sense.

Qur’an; Verse 90-91 of Surat al-Ma’idah

“O Believers! Wine and gambling and idols and (dividing by) arrows are all filthy and the works of the devil, so abhor them so that you may be successful. The devil only desires to cast among you enmity and hatred by means of wine and gambling, and to make you oblivious of the remembrance of Allah and of prayer. Will you not then desist (from them)?” (Qur’an 5, 90-91)

Before talking about alcohol in detail, it will be worth shedding light on the five words mentioned in this verse.

Khamr: This is an intoxicant which affects a human’s brain and senses.

Maysir: This refers to all types of gambling, where a person can win large amounts of wealth through little or no effort, whereas others lose their life-earnings in a night. They then often spend the rest of the life begging for money or regretting on their evil act.

Ansab: This refers to stones and idols reserved for worship, and for which animals are sometimes
slaughtered. (Safwat at-Tafasir)

**Azlam:** This refers to the arrows used for fortune-telling purposes or for gambling purposes. For more detail on this, please refer to verse number three (note number nine) of this Surah.

**Rijs:** This means impurity and filth. Al-‘Allama Ibn Manzur writes that this word is used to describe something **Haram**, a punishment, evil or disbelief. (Lisan al-‘Arab) The word **Rijs** has been mentioned ten times in the Qur’an and each time the meaning revolves around the above-mentioned themes. In this verse, the word is used to mean impurity and forbidden.

### Traditions and Narrations regarding Alcohol

1. The consumption of alcohol was widespread amongst the Arabs and refraining from it at once would have been extremely difficult. Hence, Islam prohibited alcohol in stages. Muhammad ibn Qays (ra) narrates that when the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) came to Madinah, the locals drank alcohol abundantly and used to gamble. When the people asked him about these two practices, the following verse was revealed: ‘They ask you about alcohol and gambling; Say: they are both damaging, and they have their benefits. But the disadvantages outweigh the advantages’. (Qur’an 2, 219) People interpreted this as permission to continue these practices, and so they drank and gambled and then sought forgiveness from Allah (swt). This continued until once in Salat al-Maghrib, an Imam had been drinking prior to prayer, and read ‘O infidels! We worship what you do.’ and didn’t realise his mistake (despite the fact that such a deliberate statement can amount to apostasy). Then the verse was revealed ‘O Believers! Do not approach Prayer if you are intoxicated.’ (Qur’an 4, 43)

2. Abu Hayan al-Andulusi writes that vast majority of commentators of the Qur’an agree that this verse clearly indicates the prohibition of alcohol. ‘Umar (ra) swore that this verse declared alcohol as **Haram.** (Tafsir al-Bahr al-Muhit)

3. Even if other narration, traditions and verses did not exist which serve to conform the prohibition of alcohol, then these two verses would still be sufficient to prove its illegitimacy. This is because no other object has been described as being so detrimental than alcohol in the Qur’an.

4. The Companions of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) were Arabs and heard the Qur’an directly from the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). If they were in any doubt about this verse, then they would have most certainly asked the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) for elaboration. The reality was that they repented as soon as they heard the order from Allah (swt), proclaiming twice ‘we have rid ourselves of alcohol.’ This clearly indicates that they had no doubt about its prohibition.

5. After this verse was revealed, when the Companions (ra) realised the negative effects of drinking, they became anxious about Muslims who had died before them and thus asked the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), “O Messenger of Allah! What will happen to the Muslims before us who used to drink and died before its prohibition?” In response to this the verse was revealed: “Those who have believed and performed good actions will suffer no sin, from what they have consumed (before the ruling).” (Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal) This is because drinking alcohol was not forbidden then, and thus they could not be considered as wrongdoers. Instead they were still considered as pious and righteous Muslims, a fact confirmed by the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) when he said: “If alcohol had been prohibited in their time, then they would have refrained from drinking, just like you did.” (Tafsir Durr-Mansur and Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

6. Ibn Abbas (ra) narrated, “When the verse prohibiting alcohol was revealed, the Companions told each other of the ruling, and considered drinking to be on par with polytheism, because the same verse prohibits slaughtering animals in the name of idols, which itself was a form of polytheism.”
7. When this verse was revealed, the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) ordered the town crier to make the announcement throughout the streets of Madinah, “Be cautious! Listen carefully! Indeed wine has become prohibited.” As people heard the announcement, they smashed their goblets on the ground, to the extent that the streets of Madinah were flowing with discarded alcohol.

8. The Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “The compulsive drinker is like an idol-worshipper.” (Sunan Ibn Majah, Hadith 3375). In other words, drinking alcohol is forbidden just like worshipping idols is.

9. The Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “Three people will never enter into Paradise - he who is disobedient to his parents, he who constantly drinks alcohol, and he who reminds others of his favours done upon them.” (Sunan an-Nasa’i, Chapter 69)

10. The Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “Allah (swt) has cursed alcohol, the producer of alcohol, the person who hires the producer of alcohol, the drinker of alcohol, the provider of alcohol, the carrier of alcohol, the person who is provided with alcohol, the seller of alcohol, the buyer of alcohol, and the profiteer of alcohol.” (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

11. ‘Umar (ra) once said on the pulpit of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), “O People! The verse prohibiting alcohol has been revealed, and alcohol is made from five things: grapes, dates, honey, wheat and barley. And alcohol refers to any substance which intoxicates the brain” (Sahih al-Bukhari). No companion objected to the statement of ‘Umar (ra), and thus proves a consensus of the Companions existed regarding the prohibition of alcohol.

12. ‘Uthman (ra) said, “Refrain from alcohol, for verily it is the root of all evil. From amongst the previous nations there was a pious man. A prostitute fell in love with him. She invited the man through her servant, claiming she wanted to see him over a matter regarding a testimony. When the pious man reached her home, the servant shut the door behind him. The man found himself in a room with a beautiful woman, a small child and a bottle of alcohol. The woman said, “I swear by God! I have not called you about some testimony but for you to either commit adultery with me, drink some alcohol or to kill this child. The man opted for what he assumed was the least harmful act, and chose to drink alcohol. The woman poured a glass for the man, and encouraged him to continue drinking. The man - as he became drunk - committed adultery with the woman and killed the child too. Thus refrain from drinking. I swear by Allah! Faith escapes from the drinker.” (Sunan an-Nasa’i, Chapter 44)

13. Once ‘Umar (ra) heard that some Muslims began drinking in Syria, claiming that it was not forbidden. ‘Ali and ‘Umar (may Allah be pleased with them) agreed that they should be ordered to repent. If they did not repent, then they were to be killed. This is because they believed alcohol was permissible, and he who firmly believes that something which Allah (swt) has forbidden is permissible is a non-believer. (Tafsir al-Bahr al-Muhit and Ahkam al-Qur’an by Jassas)

14. The Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and his Companions (ra) remembered this verse as being the one which outlawed alcohol. The Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) recited this verse from Allah (swt) and learnt that the verse prohibited alcohol. The Companions heard the Qur’an directly from the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and understood this verse to refer to the prohibition of alcohol. If a scholar now appears fourteen centuries later and decides otherwise, then it is clear for all to see who is right and who is wrong.

Alcohol in the Bible

1. Now the Lord instructed Aaron, “Never drink wine or strong drink when you go into the Tabernacle, lest you die; and this rule applies to your sons and to all your descendants from generation to generation. Your duties will be to arbitrate for the people, to teach them the difference between what is holy and what is ordinary, what is pure and what is impure.” (The Living Bible, 1975, Leviticus, 10, 8-10)

2. Don’t let the sparkle and the smooth taste of
strong wine deceive you. For in the end it bites like a poisonous serpent; it stings like an adder. You will see hallucinations and have delirium tremens, and you will say foolish, silly things that would embarrass you no end when sober. You will stagger like a sailor tossed at sea, clinging to a swaying mast. *(The Living Bible, 1975, Proverbs, 23, 31-34)*

3. Don’t drink too much wine, for many evils lie along that path, be filled instead with the Holy Spirit, and controlled by him. *(The Living Bible, 1975, Ephesians, 5: 18)*

### The Prohibition of Alcohol

1. Some people wrongly assume alcohol is not prohibited in Islam, because the Qur’an does not use the word *Haram* when decreeing its use. But they should think about the meat of a lion, cheetah, kite, dog and cat. The Qur’an does not use the word *Haram* for these animals either, but still they consider them *Haram* due to the ruling in the Hadith *(Sahih Muslim, Book of Hunting, Chapter 3 and Sunan Ibn Majah, Book of Hunting, Hadith 3250)*. Thus those people who deem dogs and cats to be *Haram* only due to the Hadith, then what is preventing them to deem alcohol as *Haram* due to the Hadith in which the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, “Every intoxicant is *Khamr* and every intoxicant is *Haram*.” *(Sahih Muslim, Book of Drinks, Chapter 7, Hadith 2003)*

2. In the Qur’an the word *Rijs* has been used to declare the prohibition of alcohol, and this word denotes the same meaning as *Haram*. *(Lisan al-‘Arab)* Thus alcohol is *Haram*.

3. The literal meaning of *Rijs* is impurity and filth, something which Muslims and non-Muslims alike would detest and abhor. Hence to refer to something as *Rijs* is more emphatic than *Haram* in denoting its prohibition.

4. In verse number 146 of *Surat al-An’am*, the meat of corpse and swine is declared as *Haram*, and the reason for its prohibition is because it is *Rijs*. In this verse, alcohol is declared as *Rijs*. So if the meat of swine and corpse is declared as being *Haram* because it is *Rijs*, then naturally alcohol too will be forbidden, because it has also been described as *Rijs*.

5. Alcohol helps a person to commit an act from which he would otherwise fear and abhor. Because the consumption of alcohol can lead to other *Haram* acts, so it is forbidden. For example, one Companion recited the Qur’an after drinking alcohol in such a way which would normally necessitate disbelief, and as cited in the narration of ‘Uthman (ra), it lead to a pious person committing adultery and murder.

6. An alcoholic will never enter Paradise *(Sunan an-Nasa’i, Book of Zakat, Chapter 69)*. Only a person who indulges in *Haram* acts will not enter Paradise and thus alcohol is *Haram*.

7. In this verse, Allah (swt) has mentioned the prohibition of alcohol in the same sentence as the prohibition of idol-worship. Idol-worship is unanimously *Haram* and therefore so is alcohol.

8. Drinking is the satanic act, and the devil only encourages man to perform forbidden acts. Therefore alcohol is *Haram*.

9. To refrain from performing Salat is *Haram*, *(Tafsir Ibn ‘Abbas)* and intoxication caused by alcohol is a severe hindrance to Salat. Hence, alcohol is *Haram*.

10. To refrain from the remembrance of Allah (swt) is *Haram*, and alcohol makes a person neglectful of this duty. Hence, alcohol is *Haram*.

11. Satan creates hatred through alcohol and to cause hatred is *Haram*. Hence, alcohol is *Haram*.

12. Through the means of alcohol, the devil stirs animosity between humans. To stir animosity and tensions is forbidden, and thus alcohol is *Haram*. Moreover, frequently a drunkard discloses secrets to others, which can then lead to tension and anxiety.

13. Alcohol wastes money, and to waste money is *Haram*. Hence, alcohol is *Haram*.

14. Alcohol is the cause of numerous illnesses, like cirrhosis of the liver. To intentionally make oneself ill is *Haram* and so alcohol is *Haram*.

15. Man has superiority over animals because of his intellect. However, people often act like animals when they become drunk. Without doubt, any
substance which turns man into a beast must be considered as *Haram*.

16. The intellect serves to protect a person from committing forbidden acts. But intoxication severely affects the intellect and thus alcohol is *Haram*.

17. Muslims have been ordered to refrain from alcohol and naturally, what is obligatory to refrain from, its committing is forbidden.

18. Refraining from alcohol is the key to success in this world and the hereafter. This means that indulging in alcohol is the path to loss in this world and the hereafter. Anything which leads to loss in both worlds must be considered as *Haram*.

19. While drunk, a person can utter things which bring his life into danger. Naturally, such a substance which can lead to this unfortunate position must be considered as *Haram*.

20. The Bible mentions that alcohol leads to foolishness, stupidity and insanity, which eventually ‘bites like a poisonous serpent’. (*The Living Bible*, 1975, Proverbs, 23, 31-34) To approach a snake or serpent is *Haram* and thus to approach alcohol is *Haram*.

21. In short, the acts which Allah (swt) has declared as filthy, impure and satanic, and has ordered us to refrain from, if these acts were permissible, then what would be considered as *Haram*?

**The Punishment for Drinking Alcohol**

In the time of the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), no specific punishment was set for drinking alcohol. The person caught drinking would be hit with shoes, sticks or punched (*Tafsir Qurtubi*). However, once a drunkard was brought to the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and he was beaten with a stick approximately 40 times (*Sahih Muslim*, Book of Hudud, Chapter 8). These 40 lashes were also implemented in the time of Abu Bakr (ra) (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book of Hudud, Chapter 2) and in the early period of ‘Umar (ra). Later he noticed people were still drinking and the detrimental effects of alcohol on society were increasing. Thus - after consultation with fellow Companions - he increased the punishment to eighty lashes (*Sahih Bukhari*, Book of Hudud, Chapter 4). The reason for eighty is because when a man is drunk, he becomes foul-mouthed and rude, accusing others of crimes. The Qur’an has set the punishment for false accusations of eighty lashes, and so the drunkard is also lashed eighty times. (*Tafsir al-Manar*)