

Types of Sin in the Quran: *al-Ithm*, *al-Dhanb*, and *al-Ma'siya*

What Are the Types of Sin Mentioned in the Quran, and What Terminology Does Allah Use to Describe Them?

Most of us, in our pursuit of personal and spiritual growth, aim to cultivate virtues. However, understanding what can nullify our good deeds is even more critical than simply striving for rewards. Without identifying the obstacles that undermine our efforts, the goodness we strive for will not endure.

As discussed in previous lessons, the greatest obstacle on our path to eternity which renders all our efforts futile and prevents our good deeds from benefiting us is sin. Therefore, before seeking virtues or performing good deeds, our primary duty is to understand the various types of sin and strive to avoid them.

There are various classifications regarding the types of sin, one of the most common being the division of sins into outward and inward types. Outward or bodily sins are actions committed through physical means, such as theft, murder, alcohol consumption, espionage, gossip, and slander. On the other hand, inward or spiritual sins refer to harmful inner states harbored within the heart, such as envy, greed, anger, suspicion, hatred, hypocrisy, arrogance, and ambition.

Another classification divides sins into minor sins (*Saqhira*) and major sins (*Kabira*)

¹. Specific criteria exist to differentiate between the two, the most well-known being the explicit or implicit mention of punishment or prohibition in the Quran and

¹. Dastghayb, *Gunāhān-i kabīra*. vol. 1, p. 31; Qirā'atī, *Gunāh shināsī*.

Hadiths. Any sin for which a punishment is promised, whether directly or indirectly, or that is explicitly forbidden is classified as a major sin ². For example, murder is directly associated with divine punishment ³, or usury, which is equated to waging war against Allah and His Messenger, thereby implicitly prohibited ⁴. There are additional nuances regarding the distinction between minor and major sins discussed in jurisprudential texts, which we will go through here to avoid unnecessary elaboration.

The primary focus of this lesson is to delve into the terminology of various types of sin in the Quran, which we will explore in detail below.

The Meaning of Different Types of Sin in the Quran

In Persian, the term “sin” is used broadly to describe any wrongful act, regardless of its severity or consequences. However, in Arabic, the language of the Quran and the Household of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon them), there is a distinct term for each type of sin, each carrying its own specific connotation. This specificity is not limited to the concept of sin but extends to other ideas as well. For example, in Persian, we use the word *del* (heart), but in Arabic, there is a broad spectrum of terms, such as *al-Nafs*, *al-Qalb*, *Sirr* (mystery), *al-Khafi* ⁵, and *al-Akhfa* ⁶, each representing a different state of the human spirit. Among all the world’s languages, Arabic uniquely possesses this capacity for precision and depth; that is why Allah

². Ṭabāṭabā’ī Yazdī, *al-Urwat al-wuthq*. vol. 1, p. 681.

³. Quran, 4:93

⁴. Quran, 2:279

⁵. The hidden depths of the heart, a divine subtlety awakened through love and spiritual refinement

⁶. The most concealed aspect of the heart, symbolizing the ultimate veiled mystery in one’s spiritual journey

revealed the Quran in Arabic, ensuring the most precise and comprehensive message for humanity.

The Quran employs a variety of terms to refer to sin, such as *al-Ithm*, *al-Dhanb*, *al-Sayyi'a*, *al-Khati'a*, and *al-Fasād* (corruption), each describing a different aspect of the human soul's condition. Our deeds have various dimensions, and each term reveals a different facet of these actions. In the following sections, we will explore the meanings of each term in detail.

Al-Ithm

Al-Ithm signifies slowness or lagging behind in the pursuit of righteousness. A sin is referred to as *al-Ithm* because it hinders our progress toward fulfilling the purpose of our creation. This is comparable to when an embryo in the mother's womb temporarily ceases its development, resulting in a lack of growth. Such a fetus, upon birth, will likely face significant deficiencies and challenges that impact his worldly life⁷. Similarly, sin disrupts the soul's development, creating obstacles to a healthy transition into the *Barzakh*.

Al-Dhanb

Another term the Quran uses to describe sin is *al-Dhanb*. Linguistically, *al-Dhanb* refers to the harmful consequences and negative effects of wrongdoing. It is called *al-Dhanb* because the repercussions of committing such an act remain with the soul

⁷. Quran, 6:120

until the Day of Judgment⁸. Every action we undertake has both an immediate and a lasting impact. While the immediate effect dissipates quickly, the lasting effect endures. The soul can be likened to the body in this regard. Just as excessive consumption of unnecessary amounts of fat and sugar accumulates in the body and manifests later as illnesses, sins similarly stain the soul. Even the smallest sin, if incompatible with the existential structure of the human soul, taints it. These impurities remain within the soul and often have harmful societal consequences. For instance, when we propagate misconceptions, post inappropriate content on social media, or write books that weaken others' beliefs, the impact of our actions lasts for years, even after our death, leading generations astray. As a result, on the Day of Judgment, we will be held accountable not only for the sins we committed but also for the lasting harm they caused. This is why the Day of Judgment is said to span fifty thousand years, providing enough time for a thorough reckoning of every action and its ripple effects.

The human soul can be likened to a computer's memory, which stores data with every action we perform. When the memory is erased, the data may seem to disappear, but it can be restored through recovery tools. Similarly, when we repent and seek forgiveness for our sins, God hides the effects of those sins, but they never completely disappear. If we are not vigilant, even the slightest negligence can cause the impurities and corruption of those sins, like mud settled at the bottom of a river, to resurface and manifest themselves once again. This is why Islamic teachings emphasize avoiding all types of sin, whether minor or major, as abstention from sin is easier than seeking forgiveness afterwards⁹.

⁸. Quran, 26:14

⁹. *Nahj al-Balagha, Hikmah* 170.

Al-Sayyi'ah

Another term for sin in the Quran is *al-sayyi'ah*¹⁰, which is often contrasted with *hasanah* (good deeds) and means an ugly or detestable act. Sin is referred to as *sayyi'ah* because it tarnishes our inward self, making it resemble wild animals, and distances us from inner light, joy, and peace. In an *al-sayyi'ah*, the person knowingly commits a prohibited act; he is fully aware of its repugnance, but unable to control his lower desires, he succumbs to it.

Wazr and Thiql

The term *wazr*¹¹ translates to “burden” and represents the weight that sin places on a person, hindering their progress toward the purpose of creation. Someone laden with sins during their worldly life will face a difficult and perilous path in the *Barzakh*, as they must carry the heavy load of their sins alone, navigating through dark, frightening valleys created by their misdeeds, and confronting ferocious beasts that are the physical manifestations of their actions.

Al-Ma'siya

*Al-Ma'siya*¹² means disobedience, particularly when it pertains to defiance of a divine command. This type of sin occurs when we deliberately rebel against a command from Allah. For example, one might understand the importance of fulfilling religious obligations, respecting family rights, or refraining from actions

¹⁰. Quran, 6:160

¹¹. Quran, 35:18

¹². Quran, 58:9

that harm others, yet still rebel. This defiance stems from the dominance of the animal dimension over spiritual dimension, preventing us from adhering to Allah's commands.

Hooba

The term *hooba* appears only once in the Quran, specifically in the context of consuming the wealth of orphans¹³. It refers to a need or desire that drives a person toward sin. Since the transgressions of guardians against the wealth of orphans is often justified under the pretense of need, the verse in question uses the term *hooba* instead of *al-ithm*, and this choice of word highlights the specific context¹⁴. Additionally, *hooba* can signify something repulsive, as sin is inherently unpleasant and detestable, making this term aptly describe its abhorrent nature.

Jurm

One of the other types of sin mentioned in Islamic supplications and Quranic verses is *jurm*. *Jurm*¹⁵ refers to deviation or straying from the truth. A *mujrim* (criminal) is someone who has deviated from the normal course of life and has distanced himself from what is appropriate. Sin is called *jurm* because it causes the

¹³. Quran, 4:2

¹⁴. "In Surah An-Nisa, verse 2, the term '*hoob*' is used to describe the act of unlawfully consuming an orphan's property, emphasizing its severity as a major sin. The verse concludes with the admonition, 'It is, surely, a great sin.' According to Sayyidna Ibn 'Abbas, the word '*hooba*' originates from the Ethiopian language, meaning 'major sin,' and is similarly used in Arabic to convey the same meaning. This interpretation highlights that any unlawful appropriation of an orphan's property is a grave offense." (*Maariful Quran*, available on Quran.com)

¹⁵. Quran, 6:55

person to stray from the path of truth and its manifestations, meaning Allah and the Infallibles (Peace be upon them), and fall into misguidance.

Straying from the truth and the straight path causes the human heart to fall ill, and the more one deviates, the more severe the hearts's illness become. A diseased heart, as mentioned earlier, will face a difficult life in the *Barzakh*. Depending on the type and severity of the illness, the individual must remain in the "hospital" of the hereafter (Hell), enduring the pain of treatment until they return to their normal state.

Khata

The term *Khata* is used to denote actions that deviate from what is correct, typically referring to mistakes committed unintentionally or out of negligence. Sometimes, we commit sins due to ignorance or lack of knowledge. For instance, one might commit a sin unknowingly due to limited understanding or failure to seek proper knowledge, thereby inadvertently engaging in wrongful acts. In religious literature, such mistakes are referred to as *khata*¹⁶, like many erroneous customs and traditions practiced in various communities that are not approved by Allah and are considered *khata*.

¹⁶. Quran, 4:92

Al-Fasād

Al-Fasād is another frequently used term, appearing prominently in both Quranic literature and Persian language. It is a concept most of us are familiar with ¹⁷. For instance, we might say that a certain food has spoiled (*al-fāsid*) or that a particular belief is corrupt (*al-fāsid*). It signifies any deviation or disruption from an ideal or healthy state, whether in actions, beliefs, or relationships. For instance, sowing discord or gossiping between two people creates *al-fasād* by disrupting their relationship's normal state. Similarly, socially inappropriate behaviors, such as neglecting proper dress codes, or undermining national unity by prioritizing personal or partisan interests over collective welfare, also contribute to societal *al-fasād*.

Qabih

Qabih refers to something that is repulsive or ugly ¹⁸. Sometimes the ugliness is in the action itself, such as wearing home clothes in public. At other times, the ugliness lies in the words or behavior, such as rudeness or verbal abuse. There are also cases where the very nature of a subject is *qabih*, meaning that discussing, thinking about, or engaging in it is inherently wrong.

In this lesson, we explored the various terms used in the Quran to describe types of sin and noted that in Persian culture, words like *al-dhanb*, *hooba*, *jurm*, *al-ithm*, *wazr*, *al-sayyi'ah*, *al-ma'siyah*, *khata*, *al-fasād*, and *qabih* are generally translated as "sin." However, in the Quran and *hadith* contexts, each term carries specific

¹⁷. Quran, 28:83

¹⁸. Quran, 28:42

meanings, reflecting distinct states of the soul. Each term serves as a unique message and warning, urging us to abstain from committing sins.