

A Shared Abrahamic Table: A Scholarly Commentary on Qur'an 5:4-5 (Sūrat al-Mā'idah)

Abstract

This commentary offers a comprehensive exegetical, juristic, and thematic study of Qur'an 5:4-5 (Sūrat al-Mā'idah), verses that legislate on lawful foods, hunting with trained animals (*jawāriḥ*), the pronouncement of God's name over the catch, the lawfulness of the food of the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitāb*), and the permission for Muslim men to marry the chaste women (*muḥṣanāt*) of the believers and of those given the Scripture before. Its **scope** encompasses the two verses in their full legal and social reach; its **method** integrates five classical Sunnī *mufasssīrūn* (al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Qurṭubī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, al-Zamakhsharī), the major Twelver Shī'ī tradition (al-Ṭūsī, al-Ṭabrisī, and especially Ṭabāṭabā'ī's *al-Mīzān*), contemporary Sunnī fiqh (Rashīd Riḍā and 'Abduh, al-Qaraḍāwī, al-Zuḥaylī, fatwā councils), and critical academic scholarship, all read through the interpretive lens of the Lahore Ahmadiyya tradition as represented by Maulana Muhammad Ali. Its **key arguments** are: (1) that verse 4 establishes a rational, condition-bound framework for lawful sustenance rather than an arbitrary taboo; (2) that verse 5, revealed among the last legislative passages of the Qur'an, deliberately opens the two deepest channels of human integration — the shared table and the shared household — to Jews and Christians; (3) that the dominant Sunnī position, that the marriage permission of 5:5 stands unabrogated by Q 2:221 and Q 60:10, is exegetically sounder than the abrogation thesis; (4) that the distinctive Twelver restriction of *ṭa'ām* to non-meat foods and of *kitābiyya* marriage to the temporary (*mut'a*) contract reflects a coherent but minority reading grounded in Imāmī ḥadīth; and (5) that, read in the Lahore Ahmadiyya key, these verses constitute a Qur'anic charter for coexistence consonant with Q 5:48, Q 2:62, and Q 22:40. The commentary closes with a thematic epilogue on the shared Abrahamic table.

I. The Qur'anic Text

Q 5:4 — *Yas'alūnaka mādhā uḥilla lahum; qul uḥilla lakumu ṭ-ṭayyibātu wa mā 'allamtum mina l-jawāriḥi mukallibīna tu'allimūnahunna mim mā 'allamakumu llāhu; fa-kulū mim mā amsakna 'alaykum wa dhkurū sma llāhi 'alayhi; wa ttaqū llāha inna llāha sarī'u l-ḥisāb.*

الْيَوْمَ ... (5:4) يَسْأَلُونَكَ مَاذَا أُحِلَّ لَهُمْ قُلْ أُحِلَّ لَكُمْ الطَّيِّبَاتُ وَمَا عَلَّمْتُم مِّنَ الْجَوَارِحِ مُكَلِّبِينَ تُعَلِّمُونَهُنَّ مِمَّا عَلَّمَكُمُ اللَّهُ فَكُلُوا مِمَّا أَمْسَكْنَ عَلَيْكُمْ وَاذْكُرُوا اسْمَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْهِ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ

Q 5:5 — *Al-yawma uḥilla lakumu ṭ-ṭayyibāt; wa ṭa'āmu lladhīna ūtū l-kitāba ḥillun lakum wa ṭa'āmukum ḥillun lahum; wa l-muḥṣanātu mina l-mu'mināti wa l-muḥṣanātu mina lladhīna ūtū l-kitāba min qablikum idhā ātaytumūhunna ujūrahunna muḥṣinīna ghayra musāfiḥīna wa lā*

muttakhidhī akhdān; wa man yakfur bi-l-īmāni fa-qad ḥabiṭa ‘amaluhu wa huwa fī l-ākhirati mina l-khāsirīn.

الْيَوْمَ أُحِلَّ لَكُمْ الطَّيِّبَاتُ وَطَعَامُ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ حَلَلٌ لَكُمْ وَطَعَامُكُمْ حَلَلٌ لَهُمْ وَالْمُحْصَنَاتُ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنَاتِ وَالْمُحْصَنَاتُ مِنَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ إِذَا آتَيْتُمُوهُنَّ أُجُورَهُنَّ مُحْصِنِينَ غَيْرَ مُسَافِحِينَ وَلَا مُتَّخِذِي أَخْدَانٍ وَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِالْإِيمَانِ فَقَدْ حَبِطَ عَمَلُهُ وَهُوَ فِي الْآخِرَةِ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ

II. Six Parallel English Renderings

Because a Qur'anic verse admits of no single "correct" English equivalent, the tradition of parallel translation itself embodies the interpretive humility these verses reward. The following six renderings are summarized (with representative wording only, to respect the copyrights of the modern translators) and are compared for their treatment of the two contested nouns, *ṭa‘ām* ("food") and *muḥṣanāt* ("chaste/protected women").

1. **Sahih International (contemporary; copyrighted):** renders 5:5 as making lawful "this day" the good foods, "the food of those who were given the Scripture," and "chaste women" from among the believers and from among those given the Scripture, on payment of their "due compensation," "desiring chastity, not unlawful sexual intercourse."
2. **Yusuf Ali (1934; now public domain):** notably expansive, glossing the marriage clause " (Lawful unto you in marriage) are (not only) chaste women who are believers, but chaste women among the People of the Book," "when ye give them their due dowers, and desire chastity, not lewdness, nor secret intrigues." (Qur'an Wiki) (AUC Egypt)
3. **Pickthall (1930; public domain):** plain and literal — "the food of those who have received the Scripture is lawful for you, and your food is lawful for them," followed by "virtuous women of those who received the Scripture before you (are lawful for you) when ye give them their marriage portions."
4. **Muhammad Asad (The Message of the Qur'an, 1980; copyrighted):** interpretively renders *ṭa‘ām* as "the food of those who were vouchsafed revelation aforetime" and stresses *muḥṣanāt* as women "in a state of chastity," attaching his characteristic rationalist notes on the moral reciprocity of the verse.
5. **Mustafa Khattab (The Clear Quran, 2015; copyrighted):** modern idiom — "the food of the People of the Book is permissible for you and yours is permissible for them," and "'permissible for you in marriage' are chaste believing women as well as chaste women of those given the Scripture before you," "neither fornicating nor taking them as mistresses." (Quran.com)
6. **Maulana Muhammad Ali (Lahore Ahmadiyya; The Holy Qur'an with English Translation and Commentary, first ed. 1917):** the distinctively marked sixth rendering of this commentary. He translates 5:5: "This day (all) good things are made lawful for you. And the food of those who have been given the Book is lawful for you and your food is lawful for them. And so are the chaste from among the believing women and the chaste from among

those who have been given the Book before you, when you give them their dowries, taking (them) in marriage, not fornicating nor taking them for lovers in secret." Muhammad Ali's diction ("taking them in marriage") and his careful rendering of *muttakhidhī akhdān* as "lovers in secret" foreground the verse's moral symmetry between the spouses — a theme his commentary develops.

Analytical note. The translations diverge precisely where the classical debate lives. Yusuf Ali's parenthetical "(in marriage)" and Pickthall's "marriage portions" already encode the majority reading that *muḥṣanāt* denotes women married in legitimate wedlock for a *mahr*; Asad's "state of chastity" foregrounds moral condition over legal status; and the neutral "food" preserved by all six leaves open the very question — meat or grain — that separates the Sunnī majority from the Imāmī tradition.

III. Classical Sunnī Tafsīr

A. Verse 4: The Good Things, the *Jawāriḥ*, and the Name of God

The classical commentators read 5:4 as the affirmative counterpart to the prohibitions of 5:3. Ibn Kathīr opens by noting that after God detailed the forbidden and impure foods, He turned to what is permitted: "the good things" (*al-ṭayyibāt*). Al-Ṭabarī (Ibn Jarīr), whose *Jāmi' al-Bayān* is the foundational transmission-based tafsīr, glosses *al-ṭayyibāt* as the lawful and wholesome, citing Muqātil that it embraces every licit provision.

The interpretive weight of the verse falls on **the *jawāriḥ***. Ibn Kathīr, transmitting from 'Alī b. Abī Ṭalḥa ← Ibn 'Abbās, defines *jawāriḥ* as trained hunting animals — dogs, falcons, and "all types of birds and beasts that are trained to hunt, including dogs, wild cats, falcons, and so forth" — a reading he says was echoed by Khaythama, Ṭāwūs, Mujāhid, Makḥūl, and Yaḥyā b. Abī Kathīr. The word *mukallibīn* he derives from training beasts to hunt "as hounds" (*kilāb*) with claw and talon. Etymologically, he explains, *jawāriḥ* stems from *jarḥ* ("earning"): the Arabs said a man "*jaraḥa*" for his family, i.e., earned for them — so the hunting animals are those that "earn" the catch.

The commentators, following the ḥadīth of 'Adī b. Ḥātim (in al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb al-Dhabā'ih*; and Ibn Mājah, *Kitāb al-Ṣayd*), derive a set of conditions for the lawfulness of hunted game:

- (1) the animal must be *trained* (it returns the catch rather than devouring it);
- (2) it must *catch for its master* (*mimmā amsakna 'alaykum*) — if it eats of the prey, the Shāfi'ī school holds the game becomes unlawful, since the beast then hunted for itself; Mālik permitted the remainder if the beast ate less than a third;
- (3) the *name of God must be pronounced* when the animal is dispatched (*wa-dhkurū sma llāhi 'alayhi*);
- (4) if the game is found still alive it must be properly slaughtered; if already dead by the trained beast's action, it is lawful in that state.

Abū Ḥanīfa, as al-Qurṭubī and the later Ḥanafī tradition record, added a **fifth condition**: that the beast of prey must have *wounded* (*jaraḥa*) the game, reading this into the very morphology of *al-jawāriḥ*. The famous ḥadīth of the "two hounds" — where the Prophet forbade eating game caught by a second dog over which God's name had not been pronounced — anchors condition (3) firmly in the Sunna.

Al-Rāzī (*Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*) and al-Zamakhsharī (*al-Kashshāf*) treat the passage with their characteristic attention to grammar and rational purpose, both stressing that the verse subordinates the pleasure of the hunt to religious duty: the closing exhortation *wa-ttaqū llāh* ("keep your duty to God") warns against letting sport distract from worship.

B. Verse 5: The Food of the People of the Book

The near-unanimous Sunnī reading, reported by Ibn Kathīr from **Ibn ‘Abbās, Abū Umāma, Mujāhid, Sa‘īd b. Jubayr, ‘Ikrima, ‘Aṭā’, al-Ḥasan, Makḥūl, al-Nakha‘ī, al-Suddī, and Muqātil b. Ḥayyān**, is that *ṭa‘ām* ("food") of the People of the Book here means specifically **their slaughtered animals** (*dhabā’ih*). Ibn Kathīr states that this ruling — the lawfulness of the meat slaughtered by Jews and Christians — is "agreed upon by the scholars," reasoning that the People of the Book "believe that slaughtering for other than Allah is prohibited" and pronounce God's name at slaughter, "even though they have deviant beliefs about Allah." The remaining foods (grain, fruit, that which requires no slaughter) were already licit and needed no special dispensation, so the verse's novelty must lie in the meat.

This is corroborated by the athar of **Abū al-Dardā’**, who, asked about a sheep slaughtered by Christians as an offering at a church called Jirjis (George), replied that the food of the People of the Book is lawful and permitted eating it (Ṭabarī, *ad loc.*). Al-Zuhrī's dictum — "there is no harm in the slaughtered meat of the Arab Christians" — is transmitted with the caveat that if one *hears* other than God's name pronounced, one abstains, but is not obligated to investigate what one does not hear. (Abu Khadeejah)

A minority even held that a *prior* prohibition ("do not eat of that over which God's name has not been pronounced," Q 6:121) was in effect abrogated (or, more precisely, particularized) by 5:5 — a report Ibn Abī Ḥātim relays from Makḥūl. The mainstream, however, treated 5:5 as a clarifying mercy rather than a naskh of the meat rules.

C. Verse 5: The Permission to Marry the *Muḥṣanāt*

Here the classical debate is richest. Three questions divide the jurists.

(1) **The meaning of *muḥṣanāt***. Ibn Kathīr records two readings. ‘Umar and, following him, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, al-Sha‘bī, Ibrāhīm al-Nakha‘ī, and the Ḥanafīs took *muḥṣanāt* to mean **chaste women of upright moral character**, thereby excluding *Ahl al-Kitāb* women "of loose character" from the permission. Al-Shāfi‘ī, by contrast, read *muḥṣanāt* as the antonym of **slave women**, so that the term denotes all free women of the People of the Book. (These readings are cross-

referenced in the commentaries of Ibn Kathīr, Ibn al-‘Arabī, and al-Qurṭubī.) The verse's own gloss — *muḥṣinīna ghayra musāfiḥīna wa-lā muttakhidhī akhdān* ("desiring chastity, not fornication, nor taking secret lovers") — supports the moral reading and, notably, imposes the same standard on the **Muslim husband**, a symmetry the Lahore Ahmadiyya commentary emphasizes.

(2) The scope of "People of the Book." Ibn ‘Abbās restricted the permission to *Ahl al-Kitāb* who were subjects of the Islamic domain (*Dār al-Islām*), disallowing marriage to Jewish or Christian women in the *Dār al-Ḥarb*. The Ḥanafīs disapproved (*makrūh*) marrying women of the abode of war without deeming it unlawful, while Sa‘īd b. al-Musayyab and al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī held the verse general, drawing no distinction between *dhimmi* and non-*dhimmi* women.

(3) The dissent of Ibn ‘Umar and the practice of the Companions. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar disapproved of marrying Christian women altogether. Per the ḥadīth of Ibn ‘Umar recorded in **Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī**, he reasoned, in his own words: "*I am not aware of a greater shirk than for a woman to say that her Lord is Jesus, who is in reality one of the slaves of Allah*" — reading such a woman under the prohibition of Q 2:221 (*wa-lā tankiḥū l-mushrikāti ḥattā yu‘minna*). Against this stood the **overwhelming majority and the practice of the Companions**: Ibn Abī Ḥātim records via Abū Mālik al-Ghifārī ← Ibn ‘Abbās that when 2:221 was revealed the Muslims abstained from pagan women, but when 5:5 was revealed they married women of the People of the Book. Companions including **‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān** (who married Nā‘ila, a Christian) and **Ṭalḥa b. ‘Ubayd Allāh** and **Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yamān** (who married Jewish women) acted on the permission.

The **‘Umar-Ḥudhayfa episode** is decisive for distinguishing *discouragement* from *prohibition*. Al-Ṭabarī, after affirming *ijmā‘* that marrying women of the Book is licit, explains that ‘Umar disliked the practice lest Muslims neglect Muslim women. On an authentic chain (Shaqīq), when Ḥudhayfa married a Jewish woman, ‘Umar wrote to him: "Divorce her." Ḥudhayfa wrote back: "Do you claim she is unlawful, that I should divorce her?" ‘Umar replied: "No. But I fear you might take up the licentious among them." ‘Umar's own maxim — "The Muslim man marries the Christian woman, but the Christian man does not marry the Muslim woman" (Ibn Jarīr ← Zayd b. Wahb) — confirms that his stance was **socio-political prudence, not a legal ban**.

(4) Abrogation: Q 2:221 and Q 60:10. The pivotal question is whether the marriage permission of 5:5 was abrogated by the prohibition on marrying *mushrikāt* (2:221) or the "examined women" verse (60:10). The **majority answer is that it stands**. As the SeekersGuidance synthesis of the *uṣūl* tradition puts it, later scholars recognized that the earlier generations' talk of "abrogation" here was really **specification** (*takhṣīṣ*): 5:5 limits the general scope of 2:221 so that the prohibition applies to *idolatresses* proper and not to the women of the Book. This reconciling reading is attributed to al-Rāzī (*Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*), al-Zamakhsharī (*al-Kashshāf*), al-Bayḍāwī, al-Nasafī, and al-Biqā‘ī. Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, and Abū Ḥayyān are, as later summarizers note, "unanimous in holding that there was no [genuine] naskh" between the passages regarding the food and marriage of the People of the Book. The sound conclusion is therefore that **5:5, among**

the last-revealed legislative verses, is *nāsikh* rather than *mansūkh* — abrogating and definitive, not abrogated.

IV. Shī'ī Commentary

A. The Classical Imāmī Tafsīr Tradition

The two foundational Twelver commentaries are al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī's *al-Tibyān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (d. 460/1067), the first comprehensive Imāmī tafsīr, and al-Faḍl b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabrisī's *Majma' al-Bayān* (d. 548/1153), which is explicitly built upon *al-Tibyān* and is admired by Sunni and Shī'ī scholars alike for its systematic treatment of variant readings, grammar, occasions of revelation, and meaning. Both transmit the Imāmī positions that Ṭabāṭabā'ī later systematizes.

B. Ṭabāṭabā'ī's *al-Mīzān* on 5:5

ʿAllāma Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1981), whose *al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* is the pre-eminent modern Shī'ī exegesis and practises *tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi-l-Qur'ān* (interpreting the Qur'an by the Qur'an), takes two distinctive positions on this verse.

On *ṭa'ām*. Ṭabāṭabā'ī holds that "food" here means **grains and produce, not the slaughtered meat (*dhabā'ih*) of the People of the Book**. His route is *lexical*: he narrows the denotation of the word *ṭa'ām* itself so that it never included their meat, with the consequence that 5:5 does not particularize or abrogate the Qur'anic prohibition on eating meat over which God's name was not pronounced (Q 6:121). This is the distinctive **majority Imāmī jurisprudential position** — that the meat slaughtered by *Ahl al-Kitāb* is *not ḥalāl* for Muslims — in direct contrast to the Sunni consensus. Crucially, Ṭabāṭabā'ī grounds the exclusion not in the ritual impurity of the People of the Book but in the semantics of "food" and in the requirement of the divine name at slaughter. He anchors the reading in a narration from **Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq**, transmitted in *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, that "their food" in the verse means grains and fruits, not their slaughter, "because when they slaughter they do not mention the name of God." (A comparative academic study of *al-Mīzān* confirms: "Allāma believes that what is meant by food is grains and does not include the ritual sacrifices of the People of the Book.") Tafseerenamoona Tafseerenamoona

On marriage. Consistent with the classical Imāmī tradition, Ṭabāṭabā'ī treats **permanent marriage (*nikāḥ dā'im*) to a *kitābiyya* as prohibited or disfavored**, governed by the general prohibitions of Q 2:221 and Q 60:10, while **temporary marriage (*mut'a*) with a Jewish or Christian woman is permitted**. Rather than declaring 5:5 abrogated, he *harmonizes* it with the prohibition verses by restricting its marriage-permission to the temporary contract (and, on some Imāmī readings, to concubinage) — an approach that fits his general reluctance, throughout *al-Mīzān*, to multiply claims of *naskh*. His broader defense of *mut'a* (drawn from Q 4:24, where he argues that *al-istimtā'* "means *mut'a* marriage" and that this "is the madhhab of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt") supplies the vehicle by which the *kitābiyya* permission is applied.

C. Contemporary Marja' Positions

The living juristic authorities largely confirm this framework:

- **Sayyid 'Alī al-Sīstānī** rules, verbatim on his official site: "*For a Muslim man to marry a woman from Ahlul Kitāb permanently is against the compulsory precaution in any circumstance. And his temporary marriage to a Jewish or a Christian woman is allowed, only if he is not already married to a Muslim wife.*" He further specifies that even with a Muslim wife's consent, temporary marriage to a *kitābiyya* remains impermissible on obligatory precaution, and that a Muslim woman may not marry a non-Muslim man at all, whether permanently or temporarily.
- **Sayyid Abū al-Qāsim al-Khū'ī**, in his *Kitāb al-Nikāḥ* and in *al-Bayān* (his prolegomena to Qur'anic interpretation), likewise defends the non-abrogation of the *mut'a* verse and represents the mainstream Imāmī caution regarding permanent marriage to the People of the Book.
- On the **abrogation question in Shī'ī uṣūl**, al-Khū'ī's *al-Bayān* explicitly lists Q 2:221 among verses *alleged* to be abrogated by Q 5:5 and rejects the claim, concluding "the fact is that nothing was abrogated in either verse," since the *mushrikāt* of 2:221 (idol-worshippers) and the women of the Book of 5:5 are simply different categories — the same specification-not-abrogation logic reached by the Sunnī majority, arrived at independently.

The net effect is a **striking Sunnī-Shī'ī divergence on application** (permanent *kitābiyya* marriage and *kitābī* meat both broadly permitted in Sunnism, both restricted in mainstream Twelver fiqh) atop a **shared refusal to treat 5:5 as abrogated**.

V. Contemporary Sunnī Scholarship and Fiqh

A. The Modernist and Mainstream Permissive Line

Muḥammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā (*Tafsīr al-Manār*), the fountainhead of modern Sunnī reformism, read the *Ahl al-Kitāb* verses through their *adabī-ijtimā'ī* (literary-social) and rationalist method, affirming the licitness of both the food and the marriage while stressing the moral and communal conditions attached — a reading that influenced the twentieth-century consensus in favor of permissibility with caution.

Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, in *al-Ḥalāl wa-l-Ḥarām fī al-Islām* (*The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*), affirms that "Islam has made marriage to Jewish or Christian women lawful for Muslim men, for they are Ahl al-Kitāb... people whose tradition is based upon a divinely revealed Scripture," his first condition being "that he ascertains that she is a genuine Kitābī woman, and is not an atheistic communist." In a 2006 Qatar TV lesson he specified **four conditions** for Muslims in the West: (1) that she is *genuinely* of the People of the Book — a believing Jew or Christian, not a mere nominal adherent or an unbeliever; (2) that she is *chaste* (*muḥṣana*); (3) that she is *not hostile to Islam* (he

controversially excluded, on this basis, Israeli or pro-Israel Jewish women, framing the concern in security terms); and (4) that the marriage causes *no harm* — to the man's faith, to the religious upbringing of the children, or to the Muslim community (notably to Muslim women left without partners). Al-Qaraḍāwī's fourth condition foregrounds the pastoral realities of the Muslim minority context. (memri)

Wahba al-Zuhaylī (*al-Fiqh al-Islāmī wa-Adillatuhu*), the **European Council for Fatwa and Research**, and the **Fiqh Council / Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America** all affirm the classical permission while attaching contemporary conditions: the wife's genuine adherence to a revealed faith, safeguards for the children's Islamic upbringing, and heightened caution in minority settings. **Egypt's Dār al-Iftā'** issues the representative modern formula: it is "permissible for a Muslim man to marry a Christian or a Jewish woman without the need for her to convert," but it is "not encouraged because interfaith marriages are likely to run into problems."

A significant **restrictive countercurrent** exists. The Indonesian *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (MUI), by its **Fatwa No. 4/Munas VII/2005**, declared interfaith marriage unlawful "even with women who are *Ahl al-Kitāb*," relying on the *qawl mu'tamad* of the Shāfi'ī school (al-Nawawī, al-Rāfi'ī) and the reasoning that today's People of the Book have lapsed into *shirk* and that such marriages produce more harm (*mafsada*) than benefit — a position the academic literature notes stands in tension with the plain sense of Q 5:5. A comparable mid-twentieth-century caution appears in Egyptian juristic discourse, where a vice-president of Cairo's Sharia Supreme Court reportedly advised against such marriages on the ground that the "chastity" (*iḥṣān*) condition could not be presumed.

B. The Asymmetry Question

The classical *ijmā'* permits a Muslim man to marry a *kitābiyya* but forbids a Muslim woman from marrying a non-Muslim man, including a Jew or Christian. The **traditional justification is twofold**, as summarized by Khaled Abou El Fadl: (1) *children follow the father's religion*, so the offspring of a Muslim man and a *kitābiyya* remain legally Muslim; and (2) *Islam forbids religious coercion of a wife*, and a Muslim husband is obliged to honor his wife's revealed faith (indeed her prophets and scriptures are affirmed within his tradition), whereas — the jurists argued — no reciprocal protection was assumed in the reverse case, since Judaism and Christianity do not recognize Islam's validity, and the husband, presumed the "stronger party," might draw his Muslim wife away from her faith. Maulana Muhammad Ali's editor states the rationale crisply: a Jewish or Christian woman marrying a Muslim "would enter a household where her prophets and scriptures are believed in," whereas a Muslim woman marrying a non-Muslim "would be entering a household where the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an are not believed in."

The **strength of this consensus is itself notable**. Abou El Fadl observes, verbatim: "*all schools of thought prohibited a Muslim woman from marrying a man who is a kitabi... I am not aware of a single dissenting opinion on this, which is rather unusual for Islamic jurisprudence because Muslim jurists often disagreed on many issues, but this is not one of them.*" Yet Abou El Fadl himself, alongside **Abdullahi an-Na'im** and other progressive scholars, argues that the issue

warrants renewed ijtihād: the Qur'an nowhere *explicitly* forbids a Muslim woman from marrying a Jewish or Christian man (the only textual prohibition being on *mushrikūn*), and much of the classical reasoning presupposed patriarchal legal structures — a husband's near-total authority over his wife — that modern egalitarian family law no longer assumes. Abou El Fadl presents this not as a wholesale rejection of the classical rule but as a call for careful reexamination faithful to the broader aims of the Sharī'a. The reformist position remains, as major fatwā bodies (al-Azhar, the ECFR, AMJA) uniformly stress, a **distinct minority view** that has not been adopted by any established school.

VI. The Lahore Ahmadiyya Perspective

Maulana Muhammad Ali's commentary reads 5:4-5 in the movement's characteristically **rationalist and irenic** register. Three features stand out.

On the food of the People of the Book (note to 5:5): he writes that "animals slaughtered by the Jews or the Christians are allowed when slaughtered in the name of God," while cautioning that "any food which is clearly prohibited cannot become lawful because it is offered by a Jew or a Christian." His note to 5:4 on hunting is equally practical: game taken by trained beasts or birds — or by arrow or shot — is lawful when God's name is pronounced upon dispatch, and the still-living catch must be duly slaughtered. There is no mystification here; the law is presented as a coherent, hygienic, and reverent discipline of sustenance.

On marriage to *kitābiyya* women (note to 5:5): Muhammad Ali frames the permission as a deliberate gesture of *closeness* to the People of the Book. "In Islam intermarriages with idol-worshippers are totally prohibited (2:221)," he writes, "but in the case of a people whose religion is based on a revealed book, **in which category fall almost all the nations of the world**, the taking of their women in marriage is expressly allowed." He notes candidly that "the giving away of Muslim women in marriage to followers of other religions is not... expressly mentioned, and practice from the earliest times is against it" — acknowledging the asymmetry without dogmatism. His editor adds the reciprocity point (the *kitābiyya* enters a home where her prophets are honored) and stresses that the verse permits such marriage "*only* under the condition that the two of them follow the same code of sexual morality as would apply if both of them were Muslims" — reading *muḥṣinīna ghayra musāfiḥīn* as binding equally on husband and wife.

On the ecumenical horizon: the Lahore Ahmadiyya reading places these verses within the surah's larger vision. Muhammad Ali observes that Sūrat al-Mā'idah takes its name from the "table" of Jesus's followers (5:112-115), that the chapter concerns the relationship of Islam to Judaism and Christianity, and that 5:3's declaration of the perfection of religion belongs to the same late-Medinan moment. His note to 5:2 draws out the universalist ethic: the command not to let "hatred of a people... incite you to transgress" lays down "equal treatment for all nations... the basis for an international code for the modern world." On the tradition's broader theology of religious pluralism, the Lahore school's near-total rejection of *naskh* (Maulānā Nūr al-Dīn's

research reduced the alleged abrogations to nil) reinforces the reading that 5:5 is definitive and self-standing — a positive, permanent opening rather than a temporary concession later withdrawn.

VII. Thematic Commentary

A. Placement: The Surah of Covenants and the Completed Religion

Sūrat al-Mā'idah is, by broad agreement, among the **last surahs revealed** — al-Tirmidhī records 'Abd Allāh b. 'Amr's report that "the last surahs to be revealed were al-Mā'idah and al-Fath," and Imāmī tradition (via *Tafsīr al-'Ayyāshī*, from Imam al-Bāqir ← Imam 'Alī) dates it to two or three months before the Prophet's death and calls it "*nāsikh* and not *mansūkh*." Its opening word — *awfū bi-l-'uqūd*, "fulfil the obligations/covenants" — sets its register: this is the surah of *covenants*. It contains, in 5:3, the great declaration *al-yawma akmalu lakum dīnakum*, "This day I have perfected for you your religion." That **among the final legislative words of the Qur'an stands a verse opening the table and the household to Jews and Christians** is theologically arresting: the completed religion's closing statute is not a wall but a door.

B. Commensality and Intermarriage: The Two Deepest Integrations

Anthropologically, the two most intimate forms of social bonding are *sharing food* and *forming families*. To eat another's food is to trust their hands and their household; to marry into another community is to entrust one's lineage to it. Verse 5 opens **both** channels at once: *ṭa'āmuhum ḥillun lakum wa ṭa'āmukum ḥillun lahum* ("their food is lawful to you and your food is lawful to them") is explicitly *reciprocal*, and the marriage clause admits the *kitābiyya* into the Muslim family. As Maududi's *Tafhīm* notes on the food clause, the rule that "our food is lawful to them and theirs lawful to us" means "there need be no barriers between us and the People of the Book regarding food... we may eat with them and they with us." The Qur'an's final legislative word, on this reading, is a charter of *table fellowship and kinship* with the other Abrahamic communities.

C. A Qur'anic Charter for Coexistence

Set against medieval and modern *exclusivist* readings — those that would abrogate the permission, or (as the MUI fatwā and some Salafī currents argue) reclassify today's Christians and Jews as *mushrikūn* to void it — the plain sense of 5:5, upheld by the Sunnī majority and by the anti-*naskh* Imāmī authorities alike, resists exclusivism. It presupposes ongoing, peaceable, intimate contact between Muslims and the People of the Book. The verse is thus better read as a **standing charter for coexistence** than as a grudging wartime concession.

D. Sociological Reality

Empirically, Muslim interfaith marriage in the West remains comparatively uncommon. **Pew Research Center** data indicate that roughly **79% of U.S. Muslims** who are married or partnered

have a spouse who shares their religion — one of the highest in-marriage rates of any American religious group, behind Hindus (91%) and Mormons (82%). Reporting on the Pew surveys, the *Times of Israel* noted that "only 13 percent of American Muslims are intermarried," a figure that stood near **16% in the 2011 Pew study** and rises toward **20% among U.S.-born Muslims** — still far below, for instance, the intermarriage rate reported for American Jews. These figures matter for the pastoral debate: interfaith marriage is a real but minority phenomenon among Western Muslims, and the *asymmetry* of the classical ruling — permitting Muslim men but not Muslim women to marry out — has concrete demographic consequences that scholars such as al-Qaraḍāwī explicitly weigh (the fear that Muslim women may be left without partners).

E. Honest Treatment of the Tensions

Intellectual honesty requires naming the strains. **First**, the *asymmetry* is real and, to modern egalitarian sensibilities, difficult; the classical justifications (children's paternal religion; the wife's protected faith) are coherent within their patriarchal assumptions but are precisely what reformists reexamine. **Second**, the *conditions* — genuine adherence to a revealed faith, chastity, non-hostility, safeguards for children — can be difficult to assess in secularized settings where nominal "Christian" or "Jewish" identity may carry no living belief; al-Qaraḍāwī's and Sīstānī's insistence that the man *ascertain* the woman's actual faith responds to exactly this. **Third**, the *pastoral* burden falls heavily on interfaith families themselves: as Abou El Fadl's correspondents attest, communal pressure, contested child-rearing, and questions of ritual life (halal food, prayer, holidays) test such marriages daily. The verse's own safeguard — that both spouses uphold a shared sexual morality (*muḥṣinīna ghayra musāfiḥīn*) — points toward the deeper requirement of a genuinely shared ethical life, without which the legal permission is hollow.

VIII. Recommendations

For readers, students, and practitioners engaging these verses, the following staged guidance follows from the evidence.

1. **Begin from the plain, unabrogated sense.** Treat Q 5:5 as definitive: the food-reciprocity and the marriage permission stand. The abrogation thesis (via 2:221 / 60:10) is exegetically weaker than the specification (*takhṣīs*) reading endorsed by al-Rāzī, al-Zamakhsharī, al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, and, independently, by al-Khū'ī. *Threshold that would change this*: only a demonstrable, sound report of textual abrogation — which the tradition has not produced.
2. **Distinguish madhhab before applying a ruling on food or marriage.** A Sunnī Muslim may, per the majority, eat the properly slaughtered meat of Jews and Christians and (for men) marry their chaste women in permanent marriage. A Twelver Shī'ī should follow his or her *marja'*: mainstream Imāmī fiqh (Sīstānī, Khū'ī, Ṭabāṭabā'ī's reading) restricts *kitābī* meat and confines *kitābiyya* marriage to *mut'a*. Do not import one tradition's ruling into the other.

3. **Verify the conditions before a marriage, not after.** Following al-Qaraḏāwī and the fatwā councils: ascertain the woman's *genuine* adherence to a revealed faith (not nominal identity), confirm chastity as the verse requires of *both* parties, and settle in advance — ideally in writing — the religious upbringing of children. *Benchmark*: where these cannot be secured, the classical *karāha* (dislike) shades toward prohibition of *maṣlaḥa*, and the marriage should be reconsidered.
 4. **In minority (Western) contexts, weigh communal impact.** Take seriously the demographic and pastoral concerns (Muslim women's marriage prospects; children's faith formation). These are grounds for *caution*, not for denying the Qur'anic permission.
 5. **On the asymmetry, hold the classical ruling while engaging the reformist question honestly.** The prohibition on Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men remains the standing consensus of every established school; a responsible reader should not represent the Abou El Fadl / an-Na'im reexamination as settled law. *Threshold for revisiting*: a new juristic consensus, not an individual *ijtihād*, would be required to move the mainstream.
 6. **Read the verses within the Qur'an's pluralist theology.** Interpret 5:4-5 alongside Q 5:48, 2:62, and 22:40 (below), so that the legal permissions are understood as expressions of a coherent ethic of coexistence rather than isolated concessions.
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IX. Thematic Epilogue: The Shared Abrahamic Table

There is a quiet grandeur in the placement of these verses. When the Qur'an announces the perfection of religion — *al-yawma akmaltu lakum dīnakum* — the very next breath of legislation does not raise a barricade around the community of faith. It sets a table and opens a door. *Their food is lawful to you, and your food is lawful to them.* The completed religion's closing statute is an invitation to eat together and, in the deepest trust human beings can extend one another, to build families across the lines of creed.

Read in the Lahore Ahmadiyya spirit — the spirit that holds Islam to be a religion of reason, tolerance, and universal sympathy, and that has labored to strip away the accretions of *naskh* and exclusivism that would shrink the Qur'an's horizons — Q 5:4-5 is a small charter of the Abrahamic commonwealth. It presumes that Muslims and the People of the Book will share bread, keep company, and love one another enough to marry. It asks of that closeness only what it asks of Muslims among themselves: honesty, chastity, the honoring of covenants, the pronouncement of the divine Name over what nourishes the body. This is not the ethic of a fortress. It is the ethic of a household large enough to seat the children of Abraham.

The wider Qur'an confirms the vision. *"For each of you We have appointed a law and a way; and had God willed He could have made you one community — but that He might try you in what He gave you. So vie with one another in good works"* (5:48). The differences of law and rite are, in this reading, not a scandal to be abolished but a field of ethical competition, a *musābaqa fī l-khayrāt*. And the promise of 2:62 — that the believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians who

believe in God and the Last Day and do righteousness shall have their reward — universalizes the table into an eschatology. If God had willed one community He would have made one; that He did not is the very premise of the shared meal and the mixed marriage. Q 22:40 completes the arc, defending "monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques, in which the name of God is much mentioned" — a single sentence in which the four houses of Abrahamic prayer stand side by side under one divine protection, precisely because in all of them the Name is remembered.

To sit at that table — and, still more, to join two families across it — is to enact in ordinary life what these verses declare in law: that the perfection of religion is not the exclusion of the other, but the confidence to break bread with the other in the fear and love of the one God. That confidence, the Lahore Ahmadiyya tradition insists, is the truest measure of a faith that calls itself complete.

And God knows best. — wa Llāhu a‘lam.

A Note on Sources and Disagreements

This commentary has, per its method, presented disagreements openly: Sunnī (majority: *ṭa‘ām* = meat, permanent *kitābiyya* marriage permitted, 5:5 unabrogated) versus Twelver Shī‘ī (majority: *ṭa‘ām* = grain, permanent *kitābiyya* marriage disfavored/*mut‘a* permitted, likewise unabrogated); classical *ijmā‘* on the marriage asymmetry versus contemporary reformist reexamination; and the permissive mainstream (al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Qaraḍāwī, Dār al-Iftā‘) versus restrictive currents (Ibn ‘Umar's dissent; the MUI 2005 fatwā). Where reports vary in strength — for instance, the several athar on ‘Umar's discouragement — the more authentically chained (the Shaqīq and Zayd b. Wahb transmissions) have been preferred, and ‘Umar's stance identified as prudential rather than prohibitive. Statistical claims are drawn from Pew Research Center data as reported in 2011 and subsequent surveys; readers should note that survey samples of American Muslims are small and figures (13–20%) vary by cohort and year.