

Omens

Description: An overview of the omens commonly found to exist in modern society, their possible origins and the Islamic stance on omens.

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Category: Lessons > [Islamic Beliefs](#) > [Oneness of God \(Tawheed\)](#)

Prerequisites

- Belief in Allah (2 parts).

Objectives

- To understand how prevalent omens are in modern society.
- To learn the precise meaning of an omen.
- To present an overview of common omens and their possible origins.
- To give the Islamic ruling on omens.
- To present a prayer for atoning belief in omens.

Arabic Terms

- *Tawheed* - The Oneness and Uniqueness of Allah with respect to His Lordship, His Names and Attributes and in His right to be worshipped.
- *Shirk* - a word that implies ascribing partners to Allah, or ascribing divine attributes to other than Allah, or believing that the source of power, harm and blessings comes from another besides Allah.
- *Tiyarah* - Taking omen through bird's movements or things.

An omen is defined as a sign portending a future event. Some omens are taken as signs of good fortune while others are interpreted as a sign of impending evil. Many superstitions in the name of good and bad omens are widespread in the world, and a Muslim should have a clear understanding as to how it affects their belief. Omens are not meaningless little things people just believe in; rather, they are based on pagan, non-Islamic ideas. One should keep in mind that idolatry did not appear overnight. Rather, such superstitions first take root and open the door to the worship of idols, human gods, and stars. Slowly people forget the pure teachings of their prophets - *tawheed* - and mixed them with superstitions. Islam closes all such doors and uproots every superstition that can destroy the simple, pure belief in *tawheed*.

The following are a few examples of numerous widespread omens:

(1) Breaking a mirror means suffering seven years of bad luck: before the invention of mirrors, man would gaze at his reflection, perceived as his 'other self', in pools, ponds, and lakes. If the image was distorted, it was taken as a sign of impending disaster. Thus the 'unbreakable' metal mirrors of the early Egyptians and Greeks were valued items because of their magical properties (such as possessing undistorted reflecting properties). After glass mirrors were introduced, the Romans took the broken mirror as a sign of bad luck, since each piece reflected and multiplied their 'other self'. The length of the prescribed misfortune came from the Roman belief that man's body was physically rejuvenated every 7 years, and he became, in effect, a new man.

(2) Knocking on wood: the ancient belief that spirits either dwelled in, or guarded trees. Greeks worshipped the oak as it was sacred to Zeus, Celts believed in tree spirits, and both believed touching sacred trees would bring good fortune. Irish lore holds that 'touching wood' is a way to thank the leprechauns for a bit of luck. Pagans also held similar beliefs of protective tree spirits. Chinese and Koreans thought the spirits of mothers who died in childbirth remained in nearby trees. Another explanation points to the wooden Christian cross as the origin of 'good luck,' although this is likely a Christian adaptation of earlier pagan practices.

(3) The inadvertent spilling of salt is believed to be followed by misfortune, so it is deliberately spilled, or cast, over the left shoulder to counter it. Superstitions about salt date back to biblical times when salt was a highly prized commodity. It was expensive, crucial in preserving food, and was often used in place of currency. So spilling salt was considered an almost sacrilegious offence, and left one exposed to the devil's machinations. Throwing salt over your shoulder is thought to be a way of keeping the devil at bay while you are in especially vulnerable. The salt is either intended to blind the devil so he can not witness your error, or keep him from sneaking up on you while you are cleaning up the mess.

(4) Friday 13th: Western culture has considered Friday 13th particularly unlucky for hundreds of years. The 13th floor in many high-rise buildings in America is called the 14th floor. The sixth day of the week has often been considered unlucky, as has the number 13. The combination, which occurs one to three times a year, leads inevitably to this reinforced superstition.

People avoid traveling on this day. Some say the number 13 was purposely vilified by the priests of patriarchal religions because it represented femininity. Thirteen corresponded to the number of lunar (menstrual) cycles in a year, and the number was revered in prehistoric goddess-worshipping cultures. Hindus believed that it was unlucky for 13 people to gather in one place. This conviction was shared by the ancient Scandinavians. Many biblical events of negative import supposedly occurred on a Friday, including the ejection of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, the start of the Great Flood, and the purported crucifixion of Jesus.

Islamic Ruling on Omens

Before Islam the Arabs used to consider the direction in which birds flew to be a sign of good or bad omen. If a person set out on a journey and saw a bird fly over him to his left, he would return home. This practice was called *tiyarah*. The ancient Arabs took their omens from birds, but other nations take theirs from elsewhere. In essence they are all same. Therefore, *tiyarah* refers to a general belief in omens and the underlying *shirk* in all

of them is the same. Islam invalidated such superstitious practices because they direct a very important worship of the heart – trust – to other than Allah. The Prophet, may his mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, said,

“Tiyarah is shirk, and the one who does it is not of us. Allah will relieve one from it (its belief) by being dependant on Allah” (Al-Tirmidhi)

One of the companions of the Prophet said that some people follow the bird omens. The Prophet said,

“This is something you have made up yourselves, so do not let it stop you.” (Saheeh Muslim)

What the Prophet meant is that such omens are only in man’s imagination; therefore, they should not stop a person from doing what he planned to do. Allah did not make the flight pattern of a bird a sign of good or bad luck.

The companions of the Prophet took the prohibition of omens seriously. Ikrima said that once they were sitting with Ibn Abbas, the companion of the Prophet, and a bird flew over their heads and screeched. A man exclaimed, ‘Good! Good!’ Ibn Abbas corrected him, ‘There is neither good nor evil in it.’

These superstitious beliefs attribute the ability to cause good or bad fortune to Allah’s creation. Also, fear of misfortune and hope of good luck is directed to other than Allah, whereas it should have been directed to Allah. Such beliefs also suppose it is possible to predict future events, whereas Allah is the only One who knows what will happen in the future. Allah told the Prophet in the Quran to say that if he had known the unseen, the Prophet would have gathered all the good around himself (Quran 7:188)

Allah’s Messenger said,

“Tiyarah is shirk, tiyarah is shirk.” (Abu Dawud)

In another hadith he said,

“Who ever is prevented from doing something by tiyarah has committed shirk.” (Al-Tirmidhi, Ibn Majah)

When the companions asked what its atonement was, he instructed them to say:

Allah-humma la khayraa illa khayruk, wa laa tayra illa tayruk, wa la illaha illa ghayruk.

“O Allah, there is no good except Your good, nor omen except Your omen, and there is no god beside You.” (Ahmad, Tabarani)

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