

Thackston on Mā, Mā...Min, and the Negative Perfect

73 Uses of *Mā*.

73.1 The particle *mā* followed by the affirmative perfect gives the equivalent of the English “as / so long as.” Followed by *lam* + jussive, *mā* means “so long as...not” or “until.”

ما عصيتني اعدبك	<i>mā ‘aṣaytanī</i> <i>’u’aḏḏibuka</i>	As long as you disobey me, I will punish you.
لا نخاف ما كنتم معنا	<i>lā naxāfu mā kuntum</i> <i>ma‘anā</i>	We do not fear so long as you are with us.
لا جناح عليكم إن طلقتم النساء ما لم تمسوهن	<i>lā junāḥa ‘alaykum ‘in</i> <i>ṭallaqtumu n-nisā’ a</i> <i>mā lam tamassū-</i> <i>hunna</i>	It is no sin for you if you divorce women so long as you have not touched them.

73.2 The enclitic particle *-mā* combines with the interrogatives to give the indefinite relatives *’ayna-mā* ‘wherever,’ *’iḏā-mā* ‘whenever,’ *niḥla-mā* ‘however,’ *kulla-mā* ‘whenever, as often as.’ The indefinite relative ‘whatever’ is an anomalous form, *mahmā*. These are commonly followed by the perfect or jussive as conditional types.

هو معكم اينما كنتم	<i>huwa ma‘akum ‘ayna-</i> <i>mā kuntum</i>	He is with you wherever you are (may be).
اينما تكونوا يدرككم الموت	<i>’ayna-mā takūnū yud-</i> <i>rikkumu l-mawtu</i>	Wherever you may be, death will reach you.
كلما دخلت وجدتهم يتكلمون	<i>kulla-mā daxaltu,</i> <i>wajadtuhum</i> <i>yatakallamūna</i>	Whenever I entered, I found them speaking.
مهما تاتنا به من آية فما نحن لك بمؤمنين	<i>mahmā ta’ tinā bihi min</i> <i>’āyatin fa-mā naḥnu</i> <i>laka bi-mu’ minīna</i>	Whatever sign you may bring us, we will not believe in you.

73.3 A similar *-mā* may be added to any indefinite noun to heighten the sense of indefiniteness or nonspecificity.

يوماً ما خرجنا	<i>yawman-mā xarajnā</i>	We went out one day.
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89 The *Mā...Min* Clause. The use of the indefinite relative pronoun *mā* ‘that which’ followed by the partitive-*min* construction will be frequently encountered. Although the construction is not difficult, it differs enough from the English mode of expression sometimes to cause problems in translation. Example:

ما تنفقوا من خير	<i>wa-mā tunfiqū min</i>	Whatever good you
فلائفسكم	<i>xayrin fa-li-</i>	spend, it is for
	<i>'anfusikum</i>	yourselves.

The example would be literally translated, “what you spend of good....” By and large, the most successful method of dealing with the *mā...min* construction is to translate what follows *min* first and then what follows *mā* as an English relative clause.¹

ما يفتح الله للناس من	<i>mā yaftaḥi llāhu lin-</i>	No one can withhold
رحمة فلا ممسك لها	<i>nāsi min raḥmatin</i>	the mercy God
	<i>fa-lā mumsika lahā</i>	opens to people.
غفر له ما تقدم من ذنبه	<i>ḡafara lahu mā</i>	He forgave him his
وما تأخر	<i>taqaddama min</i>	sins past and future.
	<i>ḍambihi wa-mā</i>	
	<i>ta' axxara</i>	

13.2 The negative perfect is made by prefacing the negative particle *mā*. Although translational values are conditioned to a large extent by context, it is helpful to think of the Arabic negative perfect as equivalent to the English negative present perfect.¹

ما سمع	<i>mā sami'a</i>	He has not heard.
ما دخلنا	<i>mā daxalnā</i>	We have not entered.

¹For a *mā...min* clause with *mahmā*, see p. 190, §73.2, last example.

¹The negative past definite is expressed differently, to be introduced in §46.