

CHAPTER 36

Yāsīn

(Sūrat Yāsīn)

سورة يس

A verse-by-verse commentary on the Heart of the Noble Qurʾān

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This small effort of mine is presented in the hope that it may benefit the ordinary worshipper amongst us. May Allāh accept it. Āmīn.

Contents

Transliteration Key	4
Author's Introduction	5
Background to the Sūra.....	6
Its link to the sūra before it	6
The name of the sūra.....	7
Virtues of Sūra Yāsīn.....	8
The Heart of the Qur'ān	9
The Key Themes and Shape of the Sūra.....	10
The Tafsīr of the Sūra.....	11
Āyah 1.....	11
Āyah 2.....	12
Āyāt 3–4	12
Āyah 5.....	13
Āyah 6.....	14
Āyah 7.....	15
Āyah 8.....	16
Āyah 9.....	17
Āyah 10.....	18
Āyah 11.....	19
Āyah 12.....	20
Āyah 13.....	22
Āyah 14.....	23
Āyah 15.....	24
Āyah 16.....	25
Āyah 17.....	25
Āyah 18.....	27
Āyah 19.....	28
Āyah 20.....	28
Āyah 21.....	29
Āyah 22.....	30
Āyāt 23–24.....	31
Āyah 25.....	32
Āyāt 26–27	33
Āyāt 28–29.....	34
Āyāt 30–31.....	35
Āyah 32.....	36
Āyah 33.....	37
Āyah 34.....	38
Āyah 35.....	38
Āyah 36.....	39
Āyah 37.....	41
Āyah 38.....	41
Āyah 39.....	44
Āyah 40.....	45
Āyah 41.....	46
Āyah 42.....	47
Āyah 43.....	48
Āyah 44.....	49
Āyah 45.....	50

Āyah 46.....	51	Āyah 66.....	65
Āyah 47.....	51	Āyah 67.....	66
Āyah 48.....	52	Āyah 68.....	66
Āyah 49.....	53	Āyah 69.....	67
Āyah 50.....	54	Āyah 70.....	69
Āyah 51.....	55	Āyah 71.....	69
Āyah 52.....	55	Āyah 72.....	70
Āyah 53.....	56	Āyah 73.....	71
Āyah 54.....	57	Āyāt 74–75.....	72
Āyah 55.....	57	Āyah 76.....	73
Āyah 56.....	58	Āyah 77.....	74
Āyah 57.....	59	Āyah 78.....	75
Āyah 58.....	60	Āyah 79.....	75
Āyah 59.....	61	Āyah 80.....	76
Āyāt 60–61.....	62	Āyah 81.....	77
Āyah 62.....	63	Āyah 82.....	77
Āyāt 63–64.....	63	Āyah 83.....	78
Āyah 65.....	64		
Appendix: The Symmetry of Sūra Yāsīn			80
A Note on Sources.....			82

Transliteration Key

Arabic has been transliterated according to the following system.

ء ' ʾ	ز z	ق q	ب b
س s	ك k	ت t	ش sh
ل l	ث th	ص ṣ	م m
ج j	ض ḍ	ن n	ح ḥ
ط ṭ	ه h	خ kh	ظ ẓ
و w	د d	ع ʿ	ي y
ذ dh	غ gh	ر r	ف f

Short vowels are written a, i, u, and long vowels ā, ī, ū. The diphthongs are written aw and ay, as in *ṣawm* and Shaykh. The *tā' marbūṭa* is rendered without a final “h” (Sūra, Fātiḥa), and as “-at” in construct (Sūrat al-Fātiḥa); words found in the English dictionary keep their common spelling (Sunnah, Ummah), as do Makkah and Madīnah. The definite article is written al- in names and titles, and is joined and assimilated as pronounced in recitation passages (ar-Raḥmān, wa'l-Qur'āni'l-ḥakīm) so that the reader can recite correctly.

Author's Introduction

This brief commentary is a line-by-line study of Sūra Yāsīn, one of the most significant and well-known sūras of the Qurʾān. For a Muslim, along with reciting the Qurʾān, understanding its meanings plays an enormous role in his life, yet since it would prove difficult for each individual to undertake a thorough study of the entire Qurʾān, every Muslim should at least try to understand the key ideas and meanings of certain parts of it. These notes aim to provide an insight into some of the themes found in the Qurʾān by dwelling over the verses of Sūra Yāsīn, and since it is a sūra that is read daily by a large proportion of Muslims, it seemed befitting to focus on this oft-recited sūra in particular, so that the ordinary worshipper amongst us could contemplate over the Qurʾān daily, on at least this one sūra to begin with.

By the end of these notes, it is hoped, the reader will understand Sūra Yāsīn with a breakdown of its key themes; realise the significance of stories and examples in the Qurʾān; learn the manner and style in which Allāh ﷻ speaks throughout His book; see how the sūra of the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ is intertwined with the verses; understand something of the miraculous nature of the Qurʾān; learn several proofs that indicate Allāh's existence and oneness; ponder over the verses as we have been instructed to ponder over them; and come away with a clearer idea of the depth of the science of tafsīr. In shā' Allāh, this small effort will also create an interest in studying the Qurʾān further, and an appreciation of why it really is the greatest miracle of Islam. May Allāh accept it, and may He forgive whatever shortcomings it contains, for abler hands than mine have served this sūra before, and whatever is correct in these pages is from Him alone. Āmīn.

Background to the Sūra

ITS LINK TO THE SŪRA BEFORE IT

In the sūras leading up to Sūra Yāsīn, Allāh ﷻ gives us extensive proofs and signs of the Day of Judgement, and in Sūrat Fāṭir, the sūra immediately before it, He mentions that the disbelievers claimed, that they would believe in a message from Allāh only if a real messenger were sent to them. Allāh responds to this in Sūra Yāsīn by addressing the heart of the matter: the legitimacy of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ as a messenger, and how the disbelievers lie to themselves about why they do not believe in him.

Allāh introduces this topic by showing us how the opponents of the Prophet ﷺ had completely shut themselves off from using reason, for had they possessed any sincerity or belief in the unseen, they would have followed his guidance. He then gives us the example of the town to which He sent three messengers. Not only were the people of that town given multiple messengers to guide them, but they also had a righteous man from amongst their own who testified to the validity of the message, and despite all of the guidance and reason that they received, they still rejected it. Not only did they reject the message, but they murdered the local man who accepted the messengers.

This story shows us, that when people decide not to believe in Allāh's message, it is simply out of their arrogance. Allāh could send a nation multiple messengers with unique miracles all at once, and it would do nothing but push the disbelievers further into their defiance. As for the believers who make sacrifices to spread the truth, they will find that their efforts are graciously rewarded, and they will have no regrets for taking a stand for Allāh in this world; whatever they lose for His sake now becomes insignificant when they see the reward Allāh has in store for them, just like the man who was killed, as we shall learn in the sūra.

THE NAME OF THE SŪRA

The sūra is named after its first verse. More detail on what Yāsīn means, and why it was used, will be given in the commentary of the first āyah.

Virtues of Sūra Yāsīn

إِنَّ لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَلْبًا، وَقَلْبُ الْقُرْآنِ يَسْ، وَمَنْ قَرَأَ يَسَ كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَهُ بِقِرَاءَتِهَا
قِرَاءَةَ الْقُرْآنِ عَشْرَ مَرَّاتٍ

Sayyidunā Anas رضى الله عنه narrated that the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said, *“Everything has a heart, and the heart of the Qur’ān is Yāsīn. Allāh will record for whoever recites Yāsīn the reward of reciting the Qur’ān ten times.”* [Tirmidhī, 2887; Dārimī]

‘Aṭā’ ibn Abī Rabāḥ رضى الله عنه narrated that the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said, *“Whoever recites Yāsīn at the beginning of the day, his needs will be fulfilled.”* [Dārimī]

Sayyidunā Anas رضى الله عنه narrated that the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said, *“Whoever goes to the graveyard and reads Sūra Yāsīn, Allāh gives the dwellers of the graves ease on that day, and the reciter receives blessings equivalent to the number of the letters of the sūra.”* [cited by al-Qurṭubī]

Sayyidatunā Umm al-Dardā رضى الله عنها narrated that the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said, *“Over no person who is about to die is Sūra Yāsīn read, but that Allāh lightens the difficulties of death for him.”* [cited by al-Qurṭubī]

Sayyidunā Ibn ‘Abbās رضى الله عنهما narrated that the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said, *“My heart’s desire is that Sūra Yāsīn should be present in the heart of every individual of my Ummah.”* [al-Bazzār]

The scholars of ḥadīth note that some of these narrations have weaknesses in their chains, but they have been related by the commentators generation after generation in the chapters of virtues, where such narrations are accepted, and the practice of the Ummah in keeping the company of this sūra, in the morning, beside the dying and at the graveside, bears witness to the place it holds amongst us.

The Heart of the Qurʾān

As for the sūra being called the Heart of the Qurʾān, many explanations have been given, but the core reason is this. The heart is arguably the most important organ in the body, since it performs the vital function of pumping blood around the body and keeping it alive. Similarly, Sūra Yāsīn too is a vital sūra, as it focuses heavily on the theme of the Hereafter, a belief which keeps the spirit and faith of a Muslim alive. By reading Sūra Yāsīn regularly, you remind yourself of your Creator and of your next life, allowing you to live this life in preparation for the next.

Interestingly, Sūra Yāsīn sits close to the centre of the Qurʾān, though aligned slightly to the left of it, just as the heart sits towards the centre of the chest, though aligned slightly to the left.

The Key Themes and Shape of the Sūra

Sūra Yāsīn focuses greatly on the creed of resurrection and the Hereafter. It also concentrates on the story of the people of the town, understood by many to be Antioch, and the lessons that can be learnt from them, as well as the proofs of the existence and oneness of Allāh. A breakdown of the sūra runs as follows. Āyāt 1 to 12 establish the authenticity of the prophethood of Muḥammad ﷺ and describe its rejection by the disbelievers. Āyāt 13 to 32 relate the story of the people of the town: the rejection of their messengers, the faith of Ḥabīb al-Najjār, his killing, and the destruction of the town. Āyāt 33 to 44 set out proofs of the existence and oneness of Allāh in the land, the sky and the sea. Āyāt 45 to 47 record the excuses of the disbelievers after being told to believe. Āyāt 48 to 65 describe the frightening scenes of the Day of Judgement and the abodes of Paradise and Hell. Āyāt 66 to 76 contain warnings of the consequences awaiting the disbelievers, and an invitation to follow the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ. Finally, āyāt 77 to 83 present the arguments that establish the resurrection and the questioning before Allāh.

The Tafsīr of the Sūra

ĀYAH I

يس

1. Yāsīn.

The sūra begins with the verse Yāsīn. It has been narrated that it could be a name of Allāh's, or a name of His Messenger ﷺ, and it has also been reported that it means "O man", referring to the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ.

The verse is from amongst the *ḥurūf muqatta'āt*, literally "the cut-up letters": those verses that consist only of letters pronounced individually, without being joined by vowels. Only Allāh knows the meaning of the *ḥurūf muqatta'āt*, though it is possible that He informed His Messenger ﷺ. However, he never divulged any meaning to his Companions رضي الله عنهم, and neither did they ask. This very absence of discussion tells us, that we do not need to be overly concerned about the meaning of Yāsīn; were it crucial to our faith, the Companions would have been the first to question it and to relate it to their students.

As for the reason these letters are found inside the Qur'ān at all, the scholars explain that they are a declaration from Allāh that there are some things known exclusively to Him alone. The Arabs of the time would pride themselves on their knowledge and their talents in literature. They believed in Allāh, and they knew this was His word, so when they saw these verses, they knew that the letters meant something, though they could never work out what, despite the verses being composed of their own letters and in their own tongue.

ĀYAH 2

وَالْقُرْآنِ الْحَكِيمِ

2. By the Qur'ān that is full of wisdom.

Throughout the Qur'ān, Allāh emphasises points in various ways, and at times He does this by taking an oath before stating the point. Though Allāh has no need to take oaths to validate His word, He does so simply because it works to deliver emphasis to the listener. Usually, a person who takes an oath chooses to swear by something held in high regard by people, such that nobody would suspect him of lying once he has sworn by it. In the same way, Allāh takes oaths throughout the Qur'ān by things that humans value or consider extraordinary, and following these oaths He mentions an important, undeniable fact. Here, He has sworn by the Qur'ān itself. By choosing the noblest of books, and by adding that it is a book full of nothing but the unchangeable and wise words of Allāh Himself, He readies the reader for a fact that befits so great an oath.

The word *ḥakīm* carries both senses at once: the Qur'ān is wise, *ḥakīm*, and it is firmly constructed and authoritative, *muḥkam*, a book whose rulings and wording cannot be picked apart. A book of such wisdom and such construction cannot be the word of a human being, and this very point returns near the end of the sūra, where Allāh declares that the Qur'ān is not poetry and its bearer is no poet, a symmetry we shall return to in its place.

ĀYĀT 3–4

إِنَّكَ لَمِنَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ

3. Indeed, you are truly from amongst the messengers,

عَلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ

4. (and you are) on the straight path.

Having taken the oath in the previous verse, Allāh now states the fact it was preparing us for: that Muḥammad ﷺ is indeed His Messenger. In truth, the disbelievers of Makkah did know that he was a prophet, but they did not want to believe it, nor to profess it. They were people who were older and more senior in society, many of them leaders of their own tribes, and some of them uncles of the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ himself. To accept him as a prophet, and to have to follow his instructions, was unimaginable to them. They led campaigns to discredit his prophethood, calling him a liar, a poet, a madman and even a sorcerer, yet all the while they knew that the Qurʾān was truly a miracle from Allāh, and to hear the Qurʾān itself declaring on oath that he was a prophet, and that he was upon the correct path to Allāh, was a ground-breaking moment for them.

There is a subtlety in the choice of the word *ṣirāṭ* for “path”. Another word meaning path is *sabīl*. *Ṣirāṭ* has no plural, whereas *sabīl* has a plural, *subul*. Whenever Allāh speaks of guidance, of īmān, of dīn and of hidāya, He uses *ṣirāṭ*, because there is only a single path to guidance; but when He discusses spending in charity, He uses *sabīl*, as in *fī sabīli’Llāh*, because there are many ways of giving for the sake of Allāh.

آيَات 5

تَنْزِيلَ الْعَزِيزِ الرَّحِيمِ

5. (This Qurʾān being) a revelation from the Almighty, the Very Merciful.

Allāh's names are used on possibly every page of the Qur'ān, and despite so many names appearing, it is worth noting that each carries a specific meaning that differs from the others, and whenever He uses a name, it will always fit the context He is speaking about. Here, He speaks of His power and His mercy together. Since the previous verses were exhorting the disbelievers to accept the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ as a prophet, Allāh closes this passage by reminding them, that failure to do so will bring the punishment of the Almighty in both worlds, whereas accepting his prophethood will bring about His mercy. We should always remember that even a warning from Allāh is itself a form of mercy: the disbelievers had already done wrong by choosing not to believe despite seeing clear proofs, yet Allāh was giving them further chances and laying the consequences out before them, rather than punishing them immediately.

ĀYAH 6

لَتُنذِرَ قَوْمًا مَّا أُنذِرَ آبَاؤُهُمْ فَهُمْ غَافِلُونَ

6. So that you may warn a nation whose fathers were not warned, and thus they are unaware.

The Arabs trace their roots back to the Prophet Ibrāhīm عليه السلام. Ibrāhīm عليه السلام had two sons, Ismā'īl عليه السلام and Ishāq عليه السلام. Of the two, Ismā'īl عليه السلام settled in Makkah, following the incident of the well of Zamzam, whereas Ishāq عليه السلام remained with his father in Greater Syria. Though both had progeny thereafter, it was only Ishāq عليه السلام who had generations of prophets amongst his offspring: prophets including Ya'qūb, Yūsuf, Mūsā, Dāwūd, Sulaymān, Zakariyyā and Yaḥyā عليهم السلام, and even the final prophet of their bloodline, 'Īsā عليه السلام. From Ismā'īl عليه السلام not a single prophet was born, until the advent of the Messenger of Allāh, Muḥammad ﷺ.

Since the prophets before the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ were sent only to their own peoples, the people of the Arabian peninsula were without a prophet for thousands of years, and had therefore rooted themselves in a deeper ignorance than the nations before them. It was no wonder, then, that they were worshipping hundreds of idols, to the point that even the Ka'ba itself was filled with them.

For the warning of such a misguided nation, the greatest of prophets was required; and this prophet would not be sent merely to a small group of people in one region, but would be the final prophet, sent to the whole of mankind. This is why the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ had to be the best in every way: in his righteousness, his conduct, his character, his mercifulness, and above all in his determination and fortitude.

Having said the above, though the people of the Arabian peninsula were without a prophet for many centuries, they were never exempt from believing in and worshipping one Allāh. Though no prophet walked amongst them, Allāh still gave them the understanding to recognise, from the signs around them, that God is one. They were never made responsible for following prophets of whom they had never heard, nor for believing in scriptures that had never reached them, but only for believing in the oneness of Allāh. This is why many, such as 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the grandfather of the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ, are considered to have been upon the correct faith, despite never being exposed to any established religion besides the lingering trace of the way of Ibrāhīm عليه السلام.

ĀYAH 7

لَقَدْ حَقَّ الْقَوْلُ عَلَى أَكْثَرِهِمْ فَهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ

7. The Word has come true over most of them, and thus they will not believe.

Allāh states in this verse, that for those people who do not wish to believe, it is already determined that they will never believe. Though the verse might seem at first to suggest that Allāh Himself had chosen for them not to believe, it was in reality their own choice. They knew, and they ignored what they knew, so Allāh let matters run their course with them, for Allāh is in no need of anyone.

Allāh first gave them a choice by laying before them the right and the wrong, along with proofs to turn them towards the right. Despite this, they made the unfortunate decision not to think or ponder over the proofs, or to ignore them altogether, and so they actively decided not to believe. After this, Allāh, as He always does for people who have made a firm resolve upon something, whether good or bad, allowed them to follow the path of their choosing and created ways to make that path easier for them. Therefore, since the disbelievers had already made the decision never to believe, it was as though their final abode had already been sealed, as Allāh would now let events unfold that would end in their downfall.

We can learn from this verse, that Allāh always gives everyone the chance to change themselves, and He always presents proofs enough to convince them; but out of negligence, carelessness or sheer stubbornness we choose not to change our ways, and then Allāh lets us wander further into our troubles.

ĀYAH 8

إِنَّا جَعَلْنَا فِي أَعْنَاقِهِمْ أَغْلَالًا فَهِيَ إِلَى الْأَذْقَانِ فَهُمْ مُقْمَحُونَ

8. *Indeed, We have placed around their necks collars, reaching up to their chins, so their heads are forced up.*

Allāh continues speaking of the person who chooses not to act upon the truth, and who now finds his path towards the truth closed up before him. He gives two vivid images to demonstrate this waywardness. In the first, Allāh describes

a man with an iron collar tightened around his neck, a collar so wide that it permanently keeps his chin raised. It prevents him from looking down at the ground for any danger, from seeing what is around him, and even from looking at his own body and the world at his feet.

In the same way, when a person chooses not to accept and follow the truth, Allāh takes away his ability to see the signs of His existence and the consequences of his own actions. He no longer sees the harm in committing wrong, nor the dangers that lie ahead of him. He even fails to see the great proofs of the existence of a Creator that lie within our own bodies and their intricacies, for Allāh removes from this man the ability to look upon his own creation and ponder over it, disabling him from ever coming to realise that Allāh exists.

ĀYAH 9

وَجَعَلْنَا مِنْ بَيْنِ أَيْدِيهِمْ سَدًّا وَمِنْ خَلْفِهِمْ سَدًّا فَأَغْشَيْنَاهُمْ فَهُمْ لَا يُبْصِرُونَ

9. And We have placed before them a barrier and behind them a barrier, and have thus covered them completely, so they cannot see.

This is the second image. The man is blocked from below, so he cannot see himself; he is blocked from the front, so he cannot see the world around him and learn its lessons; he is blocked from behind, so he is cut off from history and from the stories of the people of the past that would otherwise inspire him; and he is covered over from above, so he is veiled from revelation itself. Every direction from which guidance might reach a heart has been sealed for the one who resolved that he would never be guided.

Interestingly, these opening verses of Sūra Yāsīn, up to the end of this āyah, were recited by the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ as he left his house on the night of his emigration to Madīnah, at the very moment his enemies had surrounded his home. Having recited these verses, he walked directly past them, and they were unable to see him at all. From this, the pious have taken the practice of reciting this āyah when seeking to be shielded from an enemy.

ĀYAH 10

وَسَوَاءٌ عَلَيْهِمْ أُنذِرْتَهُمْ أَمْ لَمْ تُنذِرْهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ

10. *And it is the same for them whether you warn them or you do not warn them: they are not going to believe.*

The wording here closely resembles the opening of Sūrat al-Baqara, where the same declaration is made about those who have sealed their own hearts. The Messenger of Allāh ﷺ would grieve when his own people, even his close relatives, refused to accept him as the Prophet despite seeing convincing proofs, and he would take it to be the result of his own weak efforts, and feel saddened by it. Allāh consoles him here: warning such people is not going to change them, for they have already destined themselves for the Fire, and he is not responsible for producing faith in their hearts, so he should not grieve over something he cannot change.

A prophet only has the power to speak and to act in the way Allāh commands him. He does not have the power to change hearts, nor to force people to believe. That is a step each individual must take for himself, and it is only possible if a person is humble, genuinely concerned for his own soul, and granted the ability by Allāh.

ĀYAH II

إِنَّمَا تُنذِرُ مَنِ اتَّبَعَ الذِّكْرَ وَخَشِيَ الرَّحْمَنَ الْغَيْبَ فَبَشِّرْهُ بِمَغْفِرَةٍ
وَأَجْرٍ كَرِيمٍ

11. *You can only warn the one who follows the Reminder and fears the All-Merciful without seeing Him. So give him the good news of forgiveness and a generous reward.*

The Messenger of Allāh ﷺ is told here, that only those people will benefit from his warnings who act upon the counsel already given in the Qurʾān, out of fear of Allāh. This shows us, that the advice of the Qurʾān and the Sunnah cannot penetrate a heart that has no intention of obeying Allāh in the first place.

Allāh calls Himself “the All-Merciful”, ar-Raḥmān, in this verse, because the dominant opinion we should hold of Allāh is that He is merciful. That opinion, however, should be coupled with fear; not the fear one has of a tyrant, but the fear one has of disappointing someone deeply respected and loved. This is precisely why the Arabic word used here is *khashiya*, which denotes that particular reverential fear.

The reader should hold on to three things we have learnt in these verses, because each will be mirrored in the story that follows. First, Allāh has declared that most people will not believe, and we shall see what happens in the town. Second, the warner can only benefit those who follow the messengers, and we shall hear precisely this from the lips of Ḥabīb al-Najjār. Third, glad tidings of forgiveness and a generous reward are given to those who believe, and we shall hear Ḥabīb, after his martyrdom, crying out, “*If only my people knew.*”

ĀYAH 12

إِنَّا نَحْنُ نُحْيِي الْمَوْتَىٰ وَنَكْتُبُ مَا قَدَّمُوا وَآثَارَهُمْ وَكُلَّ شَيْءٍ
أَحْصَيْنَاهُ فِي إِمَامٍ مُّبِينٍ

12. Surely We bring the dead back to life, and We write whatever they send ahead and their traces; and everything We have recorded in a clear register.

Allāh ends this opening section by telling the disbelievers, that it would not be difficult for them to change if they truly wanted to, for Allāh can do far more than change hearts; He brings the dead themselves back to life with ease, and so the changing of a heart is no difficulty for Him at all.

Alongside this encouragement comes a warning should they refuse: every deed they perform and send ahead for the next life is being recorded, together with every legacy and trace they leave behind. These traces are the marks we leave in this world, such as the books we have written, the buildings we have raised and the purposes they serve, and the actions and lessons we have taught to others. Whatever we leave behind in this world, whether good or bad, its consequence will continue to reach us in the next life long after we are gone.

A few of the words here deserve a closer look. *Āthārahūm* literally means their footsteps: the steps a person takes to the masjid, or the steps he takes to places of sin, and by extension his legacy and even his children. *Aḥṣaynāhu*, “We have recorded it”, comes from *iḥṣā*, whose root is *ḥaṣā*, pebbles, for the Arabs would count by dropping pebbles into a vessel, and so the word paints the image of every deed being counted out one by one, none escaping the tally. As for the *imām mubīn*, the clear register, it refers here to the Lawḥ Maḥfūz, the Preserved Tablet, a real tablet upon which Allāh commanded the Pen to write everything that would take place from the beginning of time to its end, and from which the angels take their instructions in carrying out Allāh’s

commands. Allāh already possessed complete knowledge of everything, but He had it written down to make the point, that it can never now be changed, for it is set down in writing. The clear register could also refer to the book of deeds, for the angels write whatever good or bad we do, and it will be displayed before us on the Day of Judgement.

A NOTE ON THE SYMMETRY OF THE SŪRA

Before we enter the story of the town, it is worth pausing to notice the remarkable symmetry with which this sūra has been constructed, for the themes of its opening verses return, deliberately mirrored, in its closing passages.

ĀYAH	AT THE BEGINNING	AT THE END	ĀYAH
2	وَالْقُرْآنِ الْحَكِيمِ The Qurʾān is wise (<i>ḥakīm</i>) and authoritative (<i>muḥkam</i>); it cannot be the word of a human	وَمَا عَلَّمْنَاهُ الشِّعْرَ The Qurʾān is not poetry, and the Prophet ﷺ is not a poet	69
6	لِتُنذِرَ قَوْمًا مَّا أُنْذِرَ آبَاؤُهُمْ The Prophet's task is to warn	لِيُنْذِرَ مَنْ كَانَ حَيًّا The Prophet's task is to warn those spiritually alive	70
12	إِنَّا نَحْنُ نُحْيِي الْمَوْتَىٰ Resurrection and accountability are real	قُلْ يُحْيِيهَا الَّذِي أَنْشَأَهَا The proof that resurrection is real	79

The one who recites this sūra daily will, in time, begin to feel these echoes for himself, and they are amongst the quiet proofs that this book was arranged by One whose knowledge encompasses its beginning and its end at once.

ĀYAH 13

وَاضْرِبْ لَهُمْ مَثَلًا أَصْحَابَ الْقَرْيَةِ إِذْ جَاءَهَا الْمُرْسَلُونَ

13. Give them the example of the people of the town, when the messengers came to it.

Allāh now instructs His Messenger ﷺ to set before the disbelievers of Makkah the example of the people of the town, who were destroyed for refusing to follow their own messengers. Three messengers were sent to them, whose names have been given in the reports as Ṣādiq, Maṣdūq and Sham'un. There is a comfort for the Prophet ﷺ woven into the telling itself, for he is being reminded that he belongs to a family of prophets, all of whom were met with the same denial.

Though many reports exist as to where exactly this town stood, one popular opinion is that it was Antioch, Anṭākiya in Arabic, a well-known coastal town in the region of modern Turkey which practised idol worship. The word used here, *qarya*, could mean either a village or a large city, but it was more likely the latter, since āyah 20 clearly calls it a *madīna*, a city. However, Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله, a renowned scholar in many fields, disagreed that this was the same town as the famous Antioch, for he concluded that Antioch was a major Christian centre, and it would have been impossible for so holy a place to be filled with idol worshippers; furthermore, there is no report in history of that city ever having been utterly destroyed.

In the end, Allāh Himself has left the matter ambiguous, for it is not the location that matters, but the moral and the lesson we take away: the town rejected its messengers, and it was destroyed for what it did.

ĀYAH 14

إِذْ أَرْسَلْنَا إِلَيْهِمُ اثْنَيْنِ فَكَذَّبُوهُمَا فَعَزَّزْنَا بِثَالِثٍ فَقَالُوا إِنَّا إِلَهُكُمُ
مُرْسَلُونَ

14. *When We sent to them two, but they rejected them both, so We strengthened them with a third, and they said, “Indeed, we have been sent to you as messengers.”*

As mentioned above, these three men were true prophets. Some scholars have related that they were elders sent by ‘Isā عليه السلام as messengers in the literal sense of envoys, rather than prophets; but others have corroborated the view that they were prophets from the following verse, in which the disbelievers of the town accuse the men of being mere human beings like themselves, to which the three reply that they are indeed messengers, indicating that they differed from the people in their very station.

Ibn ‘Āshūr رحمه الله draws attention to the sequence: Allāh sent two, and then reinforced them with a third. Why? Chance after chance after chance. Look at the mercy of Allāh, that a town bent on denial was answered not with punishment but with yet another guide.

Notice too the emphasis in their words, *innā ilaykum mursalūn*: the sentence is stressed once through *inna*, and stressed again by bringing *ilaykum*, “to you”, forward in the sentence. We have been sent precisely and deliberately to you; this is no accident of travel, and no general proclamation, but a message addressed to this town by name.

ĀYAH 15

قَالُوا مَا أَنتُمْ إِلَّا بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُنَا وَمَا أَنزَلَ الرَّحْمَنُ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا أَنْتُمْ إِلَّا
تَكْذِبُونَ

15. *They said, "You are nothing more than humans like us, and the All-Merciful has not sent down anything. You are speaking nothing but lies."*

The people refused to follow these messengers because they could not stomach their superiority. They could not accept that anyone should lead besides themselves, and out of arrogance they refused to follow. It has been a recurring excuse in the nations of the past, that they could not accept a prophet being human; they always demanded something grander, an angel perhaps, to bring the message of Allāh. Allāh counters this elsewhere in the Qurʾān: had angels been sent, humans would not have been able to see them, and had the angels then taken human form so that they could be seen, they would simply have been accused of being humans all over again.

Sayyid Quṭb observes here, that people love a touch of mystery and secrecy, something like a fairytale, assuming that this is what would make them believe; and how naïve this is, for is it not an even greater wonder that an ordinary, mortal man has been entrusted with a divine message? Notice also that their objection is a diversionary tactic. They cannot challenge the message itself, so they attack the messenger, much like the enemies of Islam today, who profess hatred for the religion but are unable to challenge its teachings on any objective ground.

ĀYAH 16

قَالُوا رَبُّنَا يَعْلَمُ إِنَّا إِلَيْكُمْ لَمُرْسَلُونَ

16. *They said, "Our Lord knows that we have indeed, truly, been sent to you as messengers."*

This verse resembles āyah 14 in its wording, yet in the Arabic there is a telling difference. Here the word *mursālūn* is preceded by the letter lām, and in the Arabic language the addition of this lām in this position adds a significantly heavier layer of emphasis. Without it, the sentence would be information carrying a light stress, perhaps enough to convince someone merely unsure; the lām is required when the emphasis must confront someone who is denying outright. The first time, the messengers introduced themselves; now that they have been called liars, the language itself rises to meet the denial.

The entire Qurʾān is filled with intricacies of this kind. This is merely one visible display of its eloquence that can be explained briefly in English; there are many more jewels that can only be appreciated by studying the Qurʾān further in its own tongue.

ĀYAH 17

وَمَا عَلَيْنَا إِلَّا الْبَلَاغُ الْمُبِينُ

17. *"And our duty is only to convey the message clearly."*

A messenger's task is never to force anyone to believe, but to deliver a message together with convincing proof of his own authenticity. The messengers of this town had performed miracles: curing the blind and those afflicted with leprosy, and even raising the dead to life. Despite witnessing these miracles the people

still refused, which shows that it was not that they were unconvinced, but that they simply did not wish to believe. The very same was true of the people of Makkah: they knew that the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ was truly a prophet, but chose not to believe him despite the many signs he had shown them.

THE SYMMETRY OF THE SŪRA: THE CONSOLATION WITHIN THE STORY

Allāh comforts His Prophet ﷺ by relating the story of other prophets who passed through an episode so like his own, and the comparison is drawn implicitly through the very vocabulary of the sūra's opening verses, as the table below shows.

SAID TO THE PROPHET ﷺ AT THE START	IN THE STORY OF THE TOWN	WHAT IS HAPPENING
تَنْزِيلَ الْعَزِيزِ الرَّحِيمِ	فَعَزَّزْنَا بِبَالٍ	Allāh, al-ʿAzīz, drives His point home by sending a third; the root ʿ-z-z echoes His own name
تَنْزِيلَ الْعَزِيزِ الرَّحِيمِ	وَمَا أَنزَلَ الرَّحْمَنُ مِنْ شَيْءٍ	The revelation of the Merciful is met with the denial that the Merciful sent anything down
عَلَىٰ صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ	إِن أَنُتَم إِلَّا تَكْذِبُونَ	The one declared straight and true is accused, in the mirror story, of nothing but crookedness and lies
إِنَّكَ لَمِنَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ	إِنَّا إِلَهُكُمْ مُرْسَلُونَ ... رَبَّنَا يَعْلَمُ إِنَّا إِلَهُكُمْ لَمُرْسَلُونَ	Prophethood is denied; Allāh affirms His Prophet ﷺ with the lām of oath, and the messengers must say it twice, the second time with that same lām
لَتُنذِرَ قَوْمًا مَّا أُنذِرَ أَبَاؤُهُم	وَمَا عَلَيْنَا إِلَّا الْبَلَاغُ الْمُبِينُ	You can only warn and convey; the guidance of hearts is divine work

أَحْصَيْنَاهُ فِي إِمَامٍ مُبِينٍ	الْبَلَاغِ الْمُبِينِ	The record is <i>mubīn</i> and the conveying is <i>mubīn</i> : the guidance is clear, and so is the account
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ĀYAH 18

قَالُوا إِنَّا تَطَيَّرْنَا بِكُمْ لَئِن لَّمْ تَنْتَهُوا لَنَرْجُمَنَّكُمْ وَلَيَمَسَّنَّكُم مِّنَّا عَذَابٌ
أَلِيمٌ

18. *They said, "Indeed, we take you as a bad omen. If you do not desist, we will certainly stone you, and a painful punishment from us will certainly touch you."*

It has been reported, that whilst the messengers were residing in the town after calling its people to the true religion, the town was struck by a famine, and the people wasted no time in attributing the famine to the messengers, just as other nations had done with their prophets in the past, such as the people of Mūsā عليه السلام. Other opinions hold that there was no such calamity, but rather that some of the townsfolk had begun to believe in the messengers, and this created a divide in the town, and it was this division that upset the people and was blamed upon the messengers.

When the people found themselves bereft of any answer, empty-handed and angry, they simply threatened to kill. And their reason? You are bad news for us, and you bring nothing but bad luck. Does it not sound familiar? In truth this is a concession, an admission of defeat: when a people can no longer argue, they have no alternative left but violence.

ĀYAH 19

قَالُوا طَائِرُكُمْ مَعَكُمْ إِنَّ فِي ذِكْرِهِمْ بَلَاءٌ لَكُمْ أَنْتُمْ قَوْمٌ مُسْرِفُونَ

19. They said, “Your bad omen is with your own selves. Is it because you have been reminded? Rather, you are a people who cross all limits.”

The messengers reply, that whatever calamities the people are suffering come only from their own actions, and this teaches us that misfortunes sometimes befall us in this life on account of our own sins. The second part of their answer questions the people: why would you take as bad omens, and even threaten with death, men who are doing nothing but sincerely advising you?

The people had indeed crossed all limits, for they were being unfair, unreasonable and inhumane. There had been no aggression and no hostility from the messengers, yet the people were already threatening them with the worst of punishments.

ĀYAH 20

وَجَاءَ مِنْ أَقْصَى الْمَدِينَةِ رَجُلٌ يَسْعَى قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ اتَّبِعُوا الْمُرْسَلِينَ

20. And a man came running from the furthest part of the city. He said, “O my people, follow the messengers.”

As the people of the town were plotting to kill the three messengers, a man named Ḥabīb al-Najjār came running from the far side of the city. He was a carpenter by trade, whence his title al-Najjār, and he lived by one of the furthest gates of the city. Before the coming of these messengers he had been an

idol worshipper, and a sincere one in his devotion. It is a mark of how noble and accepted this man became, that Allāh dedicates to him a portion of the sūra comparable to that given to the three messengers themselves.

He suffered from leprosy, which drove him to live apart from others who would have recoiled from it, and in that remote home he would pray every day to his idols to cure him. After seventy years of praying to them without answer, it was through the supplication of the three messengers that he was finally cured. Seeing this miracle, he believed at once, and withdrew to a life of solitude and worship. Yet despite living on the outskirts, the plot to kill the messengers had spread so widely that word of it soon reached him, and he came hurrying to save them despite the distance, not only because they were messengers from Allāh, but because he owed them his cure.

Ḥabīb al-Najjār was a simple man, and yet observe how many rhetorical keys he reaches for in trying to win his people over to the messengers. He begins by addressing them directly as his own people, yā qawmi, “*O my people*”, reminding them of the bond between him and them before he says a single word of counsel.

ĀYAH 21

اتَّبِعُوا مَنْ لَا يَسْأَلُكُمْ أَجْرًا وَهُمْ مُهْتَدُونَ

21. “*Follow those who do not ask of you any reward, and who are rightly guided.*”

The second way in which Ḥabīb invited his people was by pointing to the immaculate character of the messengers. Follow them, he says, for neither their sincerity nor their conduct can be faulted: they ask nothing in return for their advice and goodwill, and there is nothing in their character that could mark them as unreliable.

The word *mubtadūn*, rightly guided, tells us that their very lives displayed their goodness, for the prophets of Allāh are protected from sin. There is a lasting lesson here for all of us who would present Islam to others: we should be proper, good and effective ambassadors of this religion, and our lives should themselves show that we carry guidance. We cannot merely keep speaking and writing; we have to live it. The primary means of da‘wa will always be our behaviour and our dealings with people, and one of the greatest obstacles today for those drawn towards the religion is the sight of religiously active individuals saying one thing, and claiming to represent one thing, whilst their personal lives, their business dealings and their conduct are not lived in accordance with it.

ĀYAH 22

وَمَا لِي لَا أَعْبُدُ الَّذِي فَطَرَنِي وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ

22. “*And what is the matter with me, that I should not worship the One who created me, and to whom you will be returned?*”

The third way Ḥabīb sought to win his people over was by turning the address upon himself even while speaking to them, as though letting them know, that he wishes for them only what he wishes for himself. He frames the fault as his own rather than theirs, “*what is the matter with me*”, so that the people are not enraged by his words, and can think with a cool mind about what he has to say and quietly refer it back to themselves. There is a whole lesson in psychology in this single turn of phrase.

He directs them to reflect on the fact, that it is Allāh who created them, and He therefore deserves their worship; for like all idol worshippers who have ever lived, the people of this town did believe in Allāh as the supreme God and their Creator, but worshipped other gods alongside Him. Then, having engaged them and given them food for thought, he gently changes the pronoun from

the first person to the second: “*and to whom you will be returned.*” He reminds them that they cannot live according to their own whims, for they will be returned to Allāh whether they choose it or not, and so they must live in a way that pleases the One who will reward and punish.

ĀYĀT 23–24

أَتَأْخُذُ مِنْ دُونِهِ آلِهَةً إِنْ يُرِدْنِ الرَّحْمَنُ بِضُرٍّ لَا تُغْنِي عَنِّي شَفَاعَتُهُمْ شَيْئًا وَلَا يُنْقِذُونِ

23. “*Should I take gods other than Him? If the All-Merciful intends me any harm, their intercession cannot avail me in the least, nor can they rescue me.*”

إِنِّي إِذَا لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُبِينٍ

24. “*Then I would indeed be in clear error.*”

Having used the language of the heart to persuade them to be loyal to the One who gave them life, Ḥabīb now convinces them with logic. He poses a rhetorical question to make his people confront the feebleness and helplessness of their idols: they are, in the end, stones that can neither hear, nor see, nor speak. Ibn al-Qayyim رحمه الله remarks, that one of the primary reasons for worship is that you can lean upon your God in hard times and seek His assistance; if your god cannot even do that, what is the point of him? Even a fellow human being can come to your rescue or speak up on your behalf, but these idols can do nothing at all.

His mention of ar-Raḥmān, the All-Merciful, is deliberate, for the people had used that very name sarcastically when they said, “*the All-Merciful has not sent down anything.*” And at the same time, the name carries a comfort within his

argument: by worshipping Allāh, they would never find themselves needing rescue in the first place, for by far and large Allāh is All-Merciful, and though the hypothetical of harm stands before them, it does not befit the Merciful One to harm His servants when they are obedient.

This trust in Allāh alone is the very teaching the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ gave to the young Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما, who related: I was behind the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ one day and he said, “*Young man, I shall teach you some words. Be mindful of Allāh and He will protect you. Be mindful of Allāh and you will find Him before you. When you ask, ask Allāh, and when you seek help, seek help from Allāh. Know that if the whole Ummah were to gather to benefit you with something, they could not benefit you except with what Allāh has already written for you; and if they were to gather to harm you with something, they could not harm you except with what Allāh has already written against you. The pens have been lifted, and the pages have dried.*” [Tirmidhī, 2516]

In the twenty-fourth āyah there lies a further linguistic gem. When Allāh speaks of misguidance, He uses the preposition *fī*, “in”: *la-fī ḍalālīn mubīn*, “in clear error”. *Fī* connotes being inside something, as though inside a bubble which does not permit its occupant to see beyond it; everywhere the misguided man looks, he sees only more misguidance, and it is as though he is drowning in it. Compare this to the believer, who is described as being ‘*alā*’, “upon”, the straight path: raised up on a clear road, able to see everything around him.

ĀYAH 25

إِنِّي آمَنْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ فَاسْمَعُونِ

25. “Indeed, I have believed in your Lord, so listen to me.”

After presenting all these arguments, Ḥabīb al-Najjār professed his faith in Allāh alone. The words may have been addressed to the messengers, or even to his own people, for Allāh is their Lord too.

Sadly, these were possibly the last words Ḥabīb ever spoke. The moment he proclaimed his faith, his people did not spare him: they charged upon him at once and attacked him together. It has been reported that they kicked and trampled him so brutally that his innards were crushed out of him, whilst other reports say he was pelted with stones until he died; and since he was alone, and lowly in their eyes, no one came to save him.

Notice that Allāh does not describe how he was killed, because the focus of the passage is not the suffering of this world but the outcome in the Hereafter. Think of how the hardship of a fasting day is forgotten the moment we taste the food of ifṭār; the difficulties of this dunyā shrink to nothing beside what awaits the believer. As for the messengers themselves, there is no report of their having been killed, so the default is to assume that they were not; Allāh does not mention their end here, for the light of the passage is turned wholly upon Ḥabīb al-Najjār, and upon how he answered Allāh's invitation.

ĀYĀT 26–27

قِيلَ ادْخُلِ الْجَنَّةَ قَالَ يَا لَيْتَ قَوْمِي يَعْلَمُونَ

26. *It was said, "Enter Paradise." He said, "If only my people knew,*

بِمَا غَفَرَ لِي رَبِّي وَجَعَلَنِي مِنَ الْمُكْرَمِينَ

27. *how my Lord has forgiven me and placed me amongst the honoured ones."*

Whilst he was being martyred in this way, an angel was sent to give him the glad tidings of his entry into Paradise. Though all humans must ordinarily wait until the Day of Judgement to enter it, Allāh sometimes informs His close servants of their entry in advance, and they are even shown their place in Janna after they die.

Ḥabīb spoke the words above after his death, wishing that his people too could receive the blessing he had received. His concern for them did not wane even then; indeed it is reported, that whilst they were brutally killing him he was praying for them with the words, “*O Allāh, guide my people, for they do not know.*” This is the abiding trait of the friends of Allāh, that they pray for their enemies even whilst being harmed by them.

And notice, once more, the parallel with the start of the sūra: the believer who follows the Reminder was promised glad tidings of forgiveness and a generous reward, and here is Ḥabīb, forgiven and honoured, the promise of āyah 11 fulfilled before our eyes.

ĀYĀT 28–29

وَمَا أَنزَلْنَا عَلَىٰ قَوْمِهِ مِن بَعْدِهِ مِن جُندٍ مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ وَمَا كُنَّا
مُنزِلِينَ

28. *And after him We did not send down upon his people any army from the heavens, nor were We ever going to.*

إِنْ كَانَتْ إِلَّا صَيْحَةً وَاحِدَةً فَإِذَا هُمْ خَامِدُونَ

29. *It was nothing but a single cry, and at once they were extinguished.*

After the people killed Ḥabīb al-Najjār, Allāh's wrath descended upon them at once; yet He explains, that they were not even worth punishing by means of an army of angels. They were weak and insignificant, requiring no exceptional force, and so they were done away with by a death as simple as it was horrifying. Allāh commanded the angel Jibrīl عليه السلام to let out a single cry at the people, and that shrill, terrifying scream was enough to kill every soul in the city instantly.

Allāh describes the moment of their death with the word *khāmidūn*, “extinguished”, the word used for a fire that has been put out. The metaphor captures how swiftly their lives ended, just as a flame dies the moment it is blown out; and there is a fitting justice in the image, for they had blazed out of control like a fire, and had to be put out in a single stroke.

ĀYĀT 30–31

يَا حَسْرَةً عَلَى الْعِبَادِ مَا يَأْتِيهِمْ مِنْ رَسُولٍ إِلَّا كَانُوا بِهِ يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ

30. *O, the pity of the servants! No messenger ever comes to them but that they mock him.*

أَلَمْ يَرَوْا كَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا قَبْلَهُمْ مِنَ الْقُرُونِ أَنَّهُمْ إِلَيْهِمْ لَا يَرْجِعُونَ

31. *Have they not seen how many generations We destroyed before them, and that they will never return to them?*

Having completed the narrative of the people of the town, Allāh now turns the address towards the disbelievers of Quraysh. He expresses pity over them for their likeness to the people of that town, for both chose to mock their messengers. Yet even in this, Allāh still addresses them with honour, calling

them His servants, showing that the door remains open, that it would still be easy for them to change if they wished, and that He still desires good for them.

He then reminds them, that they are travelling the very road of the earlier nations who did exactly what they are doing and were destroyed for it. The disbelievers of Makkah were entirely familiar with the peoples who had perished before: ‘Ād in Yemen, and Thamūd at al-Ḥijr, an area north of Madīnah, both of them nations mighty in build but arrogant and defiant towards their prophets. The first was destroyed by a violent wind that raged for seven nights and eight days, and the second by a deafening cry, exactly as the people of the town were destroyed; and not one of those nations has ever returned, but each was wiped away without a second chance.

ĀYAH 32

وَإِنْ كُلُّ لَمَّا جَمِيعٌ لَدَيْنَا مُحْضَرُونَ

32. *And every one of them, all together, will be brought before Us.*

Allāh closes this section by reminding the disbelievers, that the punishment is not confined to this world. Though there may be a violent end in this life, the life of the Hereafter still remains. First, Allāh will bring them before Him on the Day of Judgement, and after the gruelling anxiety and shame of that standing, He will order them to be dragged into the Fire, where they will face a torment beyond anything they suffered in the world. The punishment of this world at least ends at some point, sometimes in an instant of death; but without death to end it, the punishment of the Hereafter is more severe and permanent. May Allāh save us from the punishment of this world and the Hereafter. Āmīn.

ĀYAH 33

وَايَةٌ لَهُمُ الْأَرْضُ الْمَيِّتَةُ أَحْيَيْنَاهَا وَأَخْرَجْنَا مِنْهَا حَبًّا فَنَهُ
يَأْكُلُونَ

33. And a sign for them is the dead land: We bring it back to life and bring forth grain from it, and from it they eat.

Having declared that everyone will be assembled before Him on the Day of Judgement, Allāh now demonstrates that power by pointing to signs we witness daily, beginning with the land itself, and the rebirth of dead ground. When soil turns dry, nothing can possibly grow in it, even were it littered with seeds; only water allows life to spring from it, and the source of that water is usually from above, by Allāh's command. Allāh can withhold this rain, or send it wherever He wishes. Through it, lands barren for years grow into lush gardens, and without it, exotic orchards crumble into dust.

Allāh reminds the disbelievers here, that He has the power to bring vast landscapes back to life; and if that is so, then raising small human beings on the Day of Judgement is effortless beside it. As before, He also reminds them that they can still change, however far they have transgressed, for He can bring anything back to life again, even a dead heart.

Nor is this revival of the land a mere display of power, for it is done to benefit us too. He brings forth from the ground every kind of produce for us to consume as and when we wish; it is as though Allāh has prepared food for us, and the entire earth is our plate.

ĀYAH 34

وَجَعَلْنَا فِيهَا جَنَّاتٍ مِنْ نَخِيلٍ وَأَعْنَابٍ وَفَجَّرْنَا فِيهَا مِنَ الْعُيُونِ

34. And We placed in it orchards of date-palms and grapes, and caused springs to gush forth within it,

Dates and grapes were the two fruits most familiar to the Arabs. Allāh generally speaks in terms relevant to the people in whose language the Qurʾān was revealed, its first recipients, though of course we may extrapolate the verse to our own lives; indeed we have been favoured beyond the Arabs of that time, for thanks to global commerce, modern transport and techniques of preservation, we can count hundreds of fruits available to us.

Alongside the fruit, Allāh provides us with crisp, natural water, fit for drinking, for cleansing and even for irrigation. We do not need to climb the mountains to fetch it; it flows down the mountainside itself by Allāh's command, and it gushes forth rather than trickling slowly, making its collection and use many times easier for us.

ĀYAH 35

لِيَأْكُلُوا مِنْ ثَمَرِهِ وَمَا عَمِلَتْهُ أَيْدِيهِمْ أَفَلَا يَشْكُرُونَ

35. so that they may eat of its fruit, though their hands did not make it.
Will they not then be grateful?

Allāh concludes the passage on the land and what it grows by pointing out, that all of the above is done for our enjoyment. Had Allāh wanted, fruits could have been as hard and tasteless as stones; they could have been merely beautiful and ornamental, but He made them soft, juicy and delectable, varying in taste,

fragrance and size. After recounting His favours, He asks His servants why they still show no gratitude; and when we compare what Allāh has done for us with what He asks of us, we realise that we are hardly being asked for much at all.

An interesting point lies in the second phrase of the verse. One way of reading it would be “*and so that they may eat what their hands have made*”, referring to the crops we cultivate by our own effort; on this reading, Allāh tells us that He permits our crops to take and to live, so that our toil pays off only by His leave. The more appropriate reading, however, is “*though their hands did not make it*”, indicating that we had no hand in making the fruits and crops at all. Though we spend our energies ploughing, sowing and watering, the real work, the germination of the seed, the sprouting of the plant and the boughs bearing their fruit, is none of our doing; and in truth, even our labour and our techniques exist only because Allāh gave us the strength and the knowledge for them.

ĀYAH 36

سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْأَزْوَاجَ كُلَّهَا مِمَّا تُنْبِتُ الْأَرْضُ وَمِنْ
أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَمِمَّا لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

36. Pure is He who created all the pairs: from what the earth grows, from their own selves, and from things they do not know.

The phrase Subhāna’Llāh is generally used in Arabic to express amazement or surprise, but its reality is more meaningful than that. The word *subhān* denotes being free of every defect and flaw, which we may summarise as being pure. When we declare that Allāh is pure, we proclaim His purity not only from ordinary flaws, but from everything that would be a flaw for His majesty and His godhood. Allāh cannot possibly have a partner, so He is pure of partners; it is unimaginable that Allāh should have children who resemble Him, for He is

unique, so He is pure of offspring. Saying Subhānaʾllāh therefore encompasses the negation of everything that does not befit Him, and this is why saying it carries such reward, for the one who says it is declaring that there is nothing like Allāh, and that He is above and beyond all else.

In this verse Allāh explains, that He has made things in pairs throughout the universe: pairs in the plants, pairs in ourselves, and pairs even in things we do not know. As for the first, it is only within the past few centuries that we have discovered the male and female reproductive parts of plants. In human beings we have male and female, but the pairing runs far beyond gender: we have paired organs, the eyes, the ears, the lips, the nostrils, the lungs, the kidneys, the arms and the feet, and matching sets such as the fingers and toes; and on the microscopic level there are pairs within us too, in the chromosomes, in the enzyme and its substrate, in the double helix of DNA, and even in the mighty atom with its two oppositely charged particles, the proton and the electron.

Nor do the pairs end with living things, for there are opposites all around us: sweet fruits and sour, the bright day and the dark night, the blazing sun and the glowing moon, and the list runs on without end. Then Allāh closes by saying that there are pairs even in things we do not know. Science is forever behind, forever making new discoveries, and there may be things in creation existing in pairs that have not yet been found, whether because our instruments have not advanced far enough, or simply because we have not looked. And Allāh knows best.

All of these pairs point to a single truth: everything Allāh has made has its counterpart or its like, and He alone has no equal and no similitude.

ĀYAH 37

وَايَةٌ لَهُمُ اللَّيْلُ نَسْلَخُ مِنْهُ النَّهَارَ فَإِذَا هُمْ مُظْلَمُونَ

37. *And a sign for them is the night: We strip the day away from it, and at once they are in darkness.*

Having described the signs upon the land that point to Allāh's oneness and existence, He now turns our gaze to the sky. The night itself is the first sign. Allāh creates it by removing the sources of light, leaving nothing but deep darkness. Living as we do in a world awash with light pollution, we cannot fully appreciate darkness until we travel somewhere remote, far from every street lamp, and see the blackness of the night sky in its full glory; and yet, for all its beauty, darkness frightens us, and we depend on Allāh giving us light through the day when we leave our homes to work.

The way Allāh describes the removal of the light is striking. He uses the metaphor of stripping the day away, *naslakhu*, as though a layer like clothing is peeled off to expose the layer beneath. It captures, first, how quickly the night sets in, especially after the ṣalāh of Maghrib; and the metaphor also indicates that the sky in its default state is darkness, so that once the light is removed, the default becomes visible. This too is a fact that science has since confirmed, that darkness is simply the absence of light.

ĀYAH 38

وَالشَّمْسُ تَجْرِي لِمُسْتَقَرٍّ لَهَا ذَلِكَ تَقْدِيرُ الْعَزِيزِ الْعَلِيمِ

38. *And the sun runs on to a resting place appointed for it. That is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing.*

Another sign of Allāh's existence and oneness is our sun. Allāh reminds us that this gigantic body is constantly in motion, and yet one day it will stop, and that day is the Day of Judgement. In another reading of the verse, *lā mustaqarra lahā*, the sense becomes "*the sun runs on with no stopping place*", for it moves continuously night and day, since our night is somebody else's day: no batteries, no deviation, no strings. It seems to run like clockwork for us; we can predict when it will rise and set, when it draws nearer for the summer months and further for the winter, and we can even predict when it will be eclipsed. Allāh controls all of this with His great power for our convenience, and has planned it all with His knowledge, which is why the verse closes with precisely those two names, the Almighty, the All-Knowing.

Science tells us that it is the Earth that orbits the sun, and not the other way around, and the Qur'ān was revealed nearly one and a half thousand years ago, when stating such a thing would have seemed far-fetched. For this reason Allāh generally addresses the reader, the first recipients being the Arabs of that time, in terms of what they could perceive and conceive, namely the sun visibly rising and setting over the Earth. Yet the verse may equally be describing the sun's own motion, and that too has now been discovered: the sun itself orbits the centre of the Milky Way, and does so at the staggering speed of around two hundred kilometres every second, where the Earth's own orbital speed around the sun is a mere thirty.

Consider that the sun is around a million times larger than the Earth; over a million Earths could fit inside it. This colossal mass is moving of its own accord, without strings or support, with precision and at incredible speed. When all of this is taken into account, how meaningful the verse becomes: this truly can be nothing but the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. And Allāh's argument presses further: if He can move such masses across the sky, what difficulty is there in simply bringing human beings back to life?

There is a further interpretation of this verse, in which the word *mustaqarr* is taken as a physical place at which the sun comes to rest, rather than an appointed time. In the ḥadīth it is reported, that the sun sets each day and then

makes its way to its resting place beneath the Throne of Allāh, where it prostrates, and does not rise again until it is given permission to do so. This raises several objections in the mind. How does the sun stop, when it is always rising and setting somewhere in the world? The Throne of Allāh is above the entire universe, and the sun is always beneath the Throne, so how does it travel to a place where it already is? And how can the sun fall into prostration when it has no body like living creatures?

The simple answer a Muslim should really give is this: if Allāh is true, and His Messenger ﷺ is true, and His book is true, then everything that Allāh and His Messenger ﷺ have said must be true, even where we cannot comprehend it. It is not that it fails to make sense; it is that we have not understood it, owing to our incapacity and the weakness of our understanding, and how could we grasp everything about Allāh when He is beyond us in every respect?

That said, these objections do have rational answers, and the scholars have explained that there is nothing objectionable in the ḥadīth or the verse at all. As to the first, consider that the sun, like all of Allāh's creation, is perpetually under His command; before rising at any horizon, it seeks His permission. Since it is always rising at some point on the Earth, it is perpetually prostrating and perpetually seeking leave to rise at the next horizon: before it moves that next inch, it has asked and been granted, though we never see the pauses in its path. As for its travelling beneath the Throne, just as it is always prostrating and asking permission, it is also beneath His Throne at all times, since it remains within the realm of the universe; and its being "*at the Throne*" may equally be a figurative expression, emphasising the manner in which this colossal sun petitions its Lord, like a beggar presenting himself at the court of a king. As for the manner of its prostration, Allāh answers this in another verse: "*each one knows its own ṣalāh and its own way of glorifying*". The sun has its own manner of prostrating, different from ours; prostration does not require a head to be placed upon a surface, for every creation worships Allāh in its own fashion. Ultimately, the verse and the ḥadīth are telling us, that the sun submits to Allāh's command before rising at each new horizon, and that this cycle will

continue until the Day of Judgement draws near, when the sun will no longer rise from the east, but will be turned back in its course and made to rise from the west, one of the great signs of the nearness of the Final Day.

ĀYAH 39

وَالْقَمَرَ قَدَرْنَاهُ مَنَازِلَ حَتَّىٰ عَادَ كَالْعُرْجُونِ الْقَدِيمِ

39. *And for the moon We have appointed phases, until it returns like an old date-palm stalk.*

After the sun, Allāh describes the office of the moon. Unlike the sun, the moon waxes and wanes, changing its shape every night, and these phases allow us to determine the months and even the particular days within them. At the end of the month it returns to its crescent form, and Allāh likens it to the stalk of a date cluster when it grows old, for it dries, bends and yellows into a thin curved sliver, the exact description of the crescent on its final night before it disappears.

The sun and the moon have each been given a different motion and a different duty: the moon for the reckoning of months, and the sun for marking the start and end of each day and for determining the seasons, since it rises and sets at different points through the year, lengthening the days as it shortens the nights in summer, and shortening the days as it lengthens the nights in winter. Between them, these two celestial bodies give our lives order, routine and predictability; yet when we consider their size, and how conveniently they have been stationed around us, it becomes plain that Someone has placed them there for our needs, rather than everything having fallen into place by chance.

ĀYAH 40

لَا الشَّمْسُ يَنْبَغِي لَهَا أَنْ تُدْرِكَ الْقَمَرَ وَلَا اللَّيْلُ سَابِقُ النَّهَارِ
وَكُلٌّ فِي فَلَكٍ يَسْبَحُونَ

40. *It is not for the sun to overtake the moon, nor does the night outstrip the day; and each is swimming in its own orbit.*

Allāh does not allow the sun to intrude upon the moon's hours. Were it to do so, the whole night would blaze like the day, wreaking havoc upon every creature on the Earth: without darkness, rest would become difficult, and even the plants, which depend on sunlight for photosynthesis, still require periods of darkness for their respiration. Nor, conversely, has Allāh allowed the night to overrun the day into perpetual darkness, for daylight is essential to see, work would be near impossible if we could not see where we were going, and darkness breeds fear and opportunity for harm, so that it would be difficult even to leave the house.

Finally Allāh mentions, that these creations of His are in contact with nothing: they float, each in its own orbit, without strings or support, and had they rested upon anything they could never have moved so freely. Each keeps to its own course without interfering with another; every star's orbit lies far from its neighbour's, preventing any collision, and you will never hear of a planet striking a planet, or the moon colliding with the sun. So it will continue until the Final Day, when, as Allāh tells us elsewhere, the sun and the moon will be brought together.

The scientific fact of the celestial bodies each moving in an orbit was unknown at the time, yet Allāh set it out plainly in the Qurʾān a millennium and a half ago; and it should be borne in mind that each of these bodies, tremendous as it is, is small against the vastness of space, like a great ship sailing upon an

unbounded ocean. A remarkable subtlety lies in the wording: Allāh said that it is not for the sun to overtake the moon, but He did not say that the moon does not overtake the sun, because, as we now know, the moon can appear in the daytime, to the point of crossing the sun's path and causing an eclipse. The people of those early centuries knew when an eclipse occurred, but may not have known that it was the moon that caused it; the finely chosen language of the Qur'ān, however, hints at exactly that, another point whose precision we have only lately been able to see. There is even a visual sign resting in the verse itself, for the phrase **كُلٌّ فِي فَلَكٍ** is a palindrome in the Arabic script, its letters reading identically forwards and backwards, as though the letters themselves were set rotating about their axis, in a verse describing rotation.

One final point must be added here. Though science has confirmed many things the Qur'ān mentions, it is not necessary for a Muslim to see such confirmation in order to believe in the Qur'ān, and our faith should not sway with what science proves or fails to prove, for faith rests upon the inner realisation of Allāh's truth and existence, not upon empirical data and research. The scientific observations above are offered only to show that science is forever catching up, not because Islam requires ratification from it. Indeed, science may one day appear to find something against Islam, and it will be in the wrong; but the danger of having used science to prove Islam will then become evident, for the one who built his faith upon it will be forced to weigh science even there, and doubts will rise, and faith will be put in jeopardy. May Allāh protect us from such doubts, and strengthen our belief in Him without the need for proof.

ĀYAH 41

وَايَةٌ لَهُمْ أَنَّا حَمَلْنَا ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ فِي الْفُلِكِ الْمَشْحُونِ

41. *And a sign for them is that We carried their offspring in the laden ship,*

Having spoken of the miraculous, benefit-laden land and sky, Allāh now turns our attention to the sea and its advantages for us. He reminds us how we travel upon the water in ships, though they are laden with heavy goods, and though we risk carrying our own children aboard them. The thought of being surrounded by a vastness of water that could toss the ship, overturn it and drown all aboard is terrifying, and yet we sail in peace for months at a time. The same water in which a single human being sinks so easily is the water that upholds a massively burdened vessel, for Allāh has given water the properties by which its surface becomes, for us, a temporary solid road, though it remains liquid in its state; and this is nothing short of a miracle.

Allāh specifically mentions the carrying of offspring to sharpen our sense of the danger, for we feel a voyage most keenly when our own children are aboard. The most probable interpretation, however, is that the verse refers to our ancestors in the ark of Nūḥ عليه السلام: the ship was loaded with the believers and with two of every kind of animal, so that “their offspring” are the children of Ādam عليه السلام himself, and Allāh did us all a great favour in saving our line from being wiped out. Another reading connects the verse to the practice of the Arabs of sending their young sons abroad by ship to trade, in which case Allāh is reminding them of two mercies at once: the buoyancy and safe passage of the boats, and sons who earned on their behalf.

ĀYAH 42

وَخَلَقْنَا لَهُمْ مِنْ مِثْلِهِ مَا يَرْكَبُونَ

42. And We created for them the likes of it, upon which they ride.

Following the stronger interpretation that the ship is the ark of Nūḥ عليه السلام, Allāh states that just as Nūḥ عليه السلام built his ark, we too have been enabled to build similar vessels for our travel; and Allāh attributes the creation of these

ships to Himself, for it was He who taught us how to build them in the first place. Another meaning the verse can carry is that this transport refers to camels and every other riding beast, and indeed the Arabs themselves knew the camel as the ship of the desert.

The closing phrase, “*the likes of it, upon which they ride*”, may even hold futuristic meanings, embracing inventions such as the car and the aeroplane, for these too are heavily burdened yet carry people from place to place, and the aeroplane seems to defy gravity itself: just as ships do not sink despite their mass, planes do not fall despite their great metal bodies. Allāh left the wording open, so that each time a new invention appears, we realise that Allāh had already foreseen it and designed it for us, though we could never have imagined it before; and only time will tell what further means of travel are yet to come.

ĀYAH 43

وَإِنْ نَشَأْ نُغْرِقْهُمْ فَلَا صَرِيحَ لَهُمْ وَلَا هُمْ يُنْقَذُونَ

43. *And if We so willed, We could drown them, and there would be none to answer their cries, nor would they be saved,*

Allāh reminds mankind, that it is a great sign of His existence that a boat filled with hundreds of souls and heavy cargo should travel upon a water surface so delicate that it parts at a touch. Given the vastness of the ocean, a person stranded in its waters faces near-certain death, with no one within hundreds of miles of those remote depths. It is Allāh’s power that has set the laws of nature, the tension of the water’s surface and the blowing of the winds, so that the sea bears up so large a vessel and carries it along; and though the waves toss it to and fro, the boat still arrives at its destination whole. A boat upon the ocean is like a feather upon the air: it ought to have no control, and yet it does. Upon the open water, a small branch and a huge ship are equals, yet Allāh grants the ship safe passage whilst the branch is lost.

It is for this reason that the traveller is taught a *duʿā* upon setting out, acknowledging that we ourselves have neither control nor power over the journey, and that we are subdued and carried only by the grace of the One who subjected these things to us.

ĀYAH 44

إِلَّا رَحْمَةً مِنَّا وَمَتَاعًا إِلَىٰ حِينٍ

44. *except as a mercy from Us, and as enjoyment for a while.*

Allāh then gives the reason He allows the boat to float at all: by His nature He is nothing but merciful, and He wills the water to be safe for our vessels so that we can take advantage of it for travel, leisure and trade. Yet He ends with a reminder, that we should treasure this safety, for it is not permanent, and the same water that cushions our journey can be turned to test us, and to destroy us, if He so wishes. His mercy, then, is not only in what He gives, but in what He continually protects us from.

There is a Qurʾānic linguistic note here worth savouring. Allāh says رَحْمَةً مِنَّا, “a mercy from Us”, where elsewhere He says رَحْمَةً مِن عِنْدِنَا, “a mercy from Our very presence”. The longer construction indicates the greater meaning, a more powerful and intimate mercy, and it is reserved in the Qurʾān for the prophets; the shorter construction still denotes true mercy, but not of the same degree, and it is what is extended to ordinary folk such as ourselves. Even in a single dropped word, the Qurʾān measures out its meanings with perfect precision.

ĀYAH 45

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ اتَّقُوا مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيكُمْ وَمَا خَلْفَكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ

45. *And when it is said to them, "Guard yourselves against what is before you and what is behind you, so that you may be shown mercy," (they turn away).*

Having set out the signs of His existence and oneness, Allāh now calls upon the disbelievers to believe in Him and obey Him; yet rather than commanding them afresh, He describes how, whenever they have been told to do so, they ignore it and turn away. He warns them, that if they persist in ignoring His Messenger ﷺ and His signs, there is a punishment in this world, "*what is before you*", and another in the next life, "*what is behind you*"; whereas if they believe, they will be shown nothing but mercy in both worlds.

The verse appears grammatically incomplete, for it contains a conditional clause with no stated consequence: it says "*when it is said to them, guard yourselves*", but does not say what they then do. This is because the tone and context of the verse, especially when read with the verse that follows, already allude to the disbelievers turning away. Throughout the Qurʾān, Allāh omits unnecessary phrases and words, so that eloquence is preserved with the utmost concision; it is as though Allāh pours the entire ocean into a single cup. Though this device is little used in English, in the Arabic tongue it is both natural and a mark of the highest style.

ĀYAH 46

وَمَا تَأْتِيهِمْ مِنْ آيَةٍ مِنْ آيَاتِ رَبِّهِمْ إِلَّا كَانُوا عَنْهَا مُعْرِضِينَ

46. And no sign comes to them from the signs of their Lord but that they turn away from it.

The word *āya* here may refer to the signs described above that point to the existence of Allāh, or to the verses of the Qurʾān itself. Allāh says, that whenever any sign reaches them, rather than reflecting over it and drawing conclusions, they shut themselves off from it at once without giving it a thought; they knew it was weighty, yet they pushed it away simply because they did not want to accept it.

The reason was their desire to go on living exactly as they had always lived, with all their comfort, power and pride intact. To accept that Allāh exists, and that He makes demands of us, would mean surrendering their vices and their positions, and humbling themselves before the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ; and they had no concern for the next life, nor any sense that these passing pleasures would soon disappear.

ĀYAH 47

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ أَنْفِقُوا مِمَّا رَزَقَكُمُ اللَّهُ قَالِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَنْطَعِمُ مَنْ لَوْ يَشَاءُ اللَّهُ أَطْعَمَهُ إِنْ أَنْتُمْ إِلَّا فِي ضَلَالٍ مُبِينٍ

47. And when it is said to them, "Spend from what Allāh has provided you," those who disbelieve say to those who believe, "Shall we feed those whom Allāh could have fed, had He willed? You are in nothing but clear error."

In the same vein as the previous verses, when the disbelievers were told at the very least to be decent human beings and spend upon the poor, they would refuse, and make the sarcastic remark, that if Allāh really wanted the poor to have food and money, He could have provided it Himself.

The reality is, that Allāh wishes to create a system of social living and mutual support, and so He makes some people wealthy precisely so that they become the means by which others receive their sustenance. He could provide everyone directly, as He does the animals; but Allāh placed the rich and the poor in their respective conditions to test whether the rich would be generous and humble, and whether the poor would be patient and grateful. Just as the poor are not kept in poverty by any shortage in Allāh's provision, so too the rich are not asked to spend because of any shortage on Allāh's part, or any need He has of their wealth.

ĀYAH 48

وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَىٰ هَٰذَا الْوَعْدُ إِن كُنتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

48. *And they say, "When is this promise to come true, if you are telling the truth?"*

Just as the disbelievers would mock the Muslims with sarcasm in the matter of charity, so they mocked them over the Hereafter. Though they believed in Allāh Himself, they found it difficult to believe that they would be resurrected, held to account, and punished in the Fire for their sins. They had been told repeatedly, that nobody knows the exact timing of the Final Day, and yet they would still ask mockingly: if it is such a certainty, how is it that you do not know when it will be? The question itself is arrogance, like a man who says, "Allāh will judge me," with a shrug; if only he knew what he was saying.

The reality is, that they did not want to believe in it at all. When a truthful man appears saying that he is a prophet, shows miracles to prove it, and then declares that there is another life whose outcome depends upon this one, an intelligent person will at the very least consider his claim and begin preparing for that next life. The disbelievers, however, had no wish to change themselves, blinded to the truth by their own deeds; and rather than sensibly preparing for the Day of Judgement and warding its punishment away from themselves, they demanded that the punishment be brought nearer, so that they might see it with their own eyes and then believe.

ĀYAH 49

مَا يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَّا صَيْحَةً وَاحِدَةً تَأْخُذُهُمْ وَهُمْ يَخِصِّمُونَ

49. *They are awaiting nothing but a single blast, which will seize them whilst they are quarrelling.*

Allāh explains, that the Day the disbelievers keep calling for will arrive suddenly and without warning, whilst everyone is engrossed in their daily business. Before the Day of Judgement begins, the angel Isrāfil عليه السلام will blow into the Horn to set in motion the events that turn this world into the plain of resurrection. The Horn will be sounded three times. The first will be a continuous, loud and terrifying blast from the heavens, at which every soul will be gripped with fear and look upwards. At the second, every creature in the universe will die on the spot, and remain dead for a long span of time. And at the third, everyone will rise again, in a new realm, and make their way to the plain of resurrection to await the reckoning of their deeds.

The present verse refers to the first blowing, the blast of terror. The quarrelling it mentions is explained in the ḥadīth: the Day of Judgement will commence so suddenly, that people will be busy in their daily affairs, shouting and haggling

in their markets, when the Horn is sounded for the first time, and fear will seize them where they stand.

ĀYAH 50

فَلَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ تَوْصِيَةً وَلَا إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهِمْ يَرْجِعُونَ

50. *Then they will neither be able to leave a will, nor return to their families.*

This verse depicts the scene at the second blowing of the Horn. Those inside their houses will have no chance to leave behind instructions for their final wishes and their financial settlements, and those outside will not even manage to reach their families one last time; everyone will die instantly, upon whatever spot he happens to stand. In the ḥadīth it is reported, that two men will have spread out a cloth between them to examine it for sale, and before it is folded again the Horn will seize them; a man will be plastering his watering trough, and before he finishes, the Horn will seize him; and a man will be raising a morsel to his mouth, and before it reaches his lips, the Horn will seize him with his hand still in the air.

Reflect on the justice hidden in this scene. They had refused to give ṣadaqa to others when they were asked; here, Allāh deprives them of even bequeathing to their own families. And it shows how unfulfilled their lives proved in the end: they refused, rejected and disbelieved precisely because they wanted to live this life to the full, yet when the moment came, they were not granted so much as a last wish. Even a convicted criminal upon death row, a known killer, is allowed a final visit from his family, a minister of religion and a last meal; these people were granted nothing at all.

ĀYAH 51

وَنُفِخَ فِي الصُّورِ فَإِذَا هُمْ مِنَ الْأَجْدَاثِ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَنْسِلُونَ

51. *And the Horn will be blown, and at once they will be hastening from the graves to their Lord.*

When the Horn is blown for the third time, all will rise alive once more in the places where they died. At first they will stand and look about, trying to understand what is happening; but before long the angels will be driving them, hurrying them towards the plain of resurrection for the questioning, so that their running will not be by choice but by compulsion.

Two features of the wording deserve attention. First, the verb is literally in the past tense, “*and the Horn was blown*”, although the event is yet to occur; this is to show that it is a confirmed fact, so certain to happen that it may already be spoken of as done, and nothing will change it. Second, the word *ajdāth* is used for the graves. This is the plural of *jadath*, a specific kind of grave, for the ordinary word is *qabr*, plural *qubūr*; *jadath* carries the sense of graves that have vanished, graves so old that they are forgotten. Even the people whose resting places the earth itself no longer remembers will rise from them on that Day.

ĀYAH 52

قَالُوا يَا وَيْلَنَا مَنْ بَعَثَنَا مِنْ مَرْقَدِنَا هَذَا مَا وَعَدَ الرَّحْمَنُ وَصَدَقَ الْمُرْسَلُونَ

52. *They will say, “Woe to us! Who has raised us from our resting place?” This is what the All-Merciful promised, and the messengers told the truth.*

When all have been raised, the disbelievers will complain at being woken from their rest. At first sight the verse seems to suggest, that the disbelievers had been resting comfortably in their graves, which would contradict the established belief that the sinful are punished there. The scholars explain, however, that the disbelievers were indeed being punished in their graves, and it was no rest at all; but against the terror of the Day of Judgement, and the harshness of what some will face upon it, the punishment of the grave will seem trivial by comparison, almost like repose.

The second sentence of the verse, “*This is what the All-Merciful promised, and the messengers told the truth,*” will be spoken either by the angels or by the believers. The choice of the name ar-Raḥmān here is to show, that Allāh had done them a great kindness in warning them of this Day, and in providing them the means of escaping the punishment of the Hereafter, a mercy they spurned.

ĀYAH 53

إِنْ كَانَتْ إِلَّا صَيْحَةً وَاحِدَةً فَإِذَا هُمْ جَمِيعٌ لَدَيْنَا مُحْضَرُونَ

53. *It will be nothing but a single blast, and at once they will all be brought together before Us.*

Immediately upon the third sounding of the Horn, every creature will reappear in its complete form: those who died upon the spot will be reanimated, and those long turned to dust will be regenerated from their very fragments. It appears in the narrations, that at this third blowing Isrāfīl عليه السلام will call out, “*O decayed bones! O crumbled joints! O scattered limbs! O torn hairs! Indeed Allāh commands you to gather for the decisive judgement.*”

The attentive reader will notice, that the very phrase used for the destruction of the people of the town in āyah 29, “*nothing but a single blast*”, returns here for

the raising of all mankind, and the phrase “*all together brought before Us*” fulfils to the letter the promise made in āyah 32. What was shown to one town in miniature will be shown to the whole of creation in full.

ĀYAH 54

فَالْيَوْمَ لَا تَظْلَمُ نَفْسٌ شَيْئًا وَلَا تُجْزَوْنَ إِلَّا مَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ

54. *Today no soul will be wronged in the least, nor will you be recompensed except for what you used to do.*

When the judgement has concluded, and Hell itself has been dragged forward by the angels, those destined for it will look towards it, filled with dread. At that point the above words will be proclaimed, and all who did wrong will begin to fear the fruit of their deeds as the Fire draws nearer and nearer. Allāh will make plain to them, that they are being punished only for the wrong they themselves committed, filling them with regret at how they spent their lives; and since they can no longer return to do good, nor can their record be erased, they will realise that there is no escape, and the dread will engulf them. May Allāh forgive us, and save us from an unfavourable judgement.

ĀYAH 55

إِنَّ أَصْحَابَ الْجَنَّةِ الْيَوْمَ فِي شُغْلٍ فَاكِهُونَ

55. *Indeed, the people of Paradise are busy today, delighting in their joys.*

The beginning of the sūra spoke of two groups of people: those who would not benefit from the message whether they were warned or not, over whose majority the Word had come true, and those who followed the Reminder and

feared the All-Merciful unseen. Here the sūra shows us the final home of each. Allāh contrasts the scene sharply by shifting our gaze at once to the people of Paradise, which makes the description of its delights seem all the sweeter, for it is the habit of Allāh in the Qurʾān to mention the good and the bad side by side.

At the same moment as the scene of the previous verse, whilst the people of the Fire watch their doom approach, the people of Paradise will be engrossed in their pleasant and thrilling new lives, entirely absorbed in their pleasures. They will be passing time with their families, enjoying food and drink prepared for them by Allāh, and even listening to the music of Paradise played upon its instruments. One core reason music is prohibited in this world is its powerfully distracting nature; but in Paradise there will be nothing except distraction, to amuse and delight its people, with nothing left to be distracted from. There will be no work, no earning of a living, and no obligatory worship; in short, there will be nothing but enjoyment.

The commentators have gone so far as to say, that the people of Paradise will be so occupied that they will forget even those of their own families who ended in the Fire, simply because concern for them would bring grief, and in Paradise there is no grief.

ĀYAH 56

هُمُ وَأَزْوَاجُهُمْ فِي ظِلَالٍ عَلَى الْأَرَائِكِ مُتَكِنُونَ

56. *They and their spouses will be in shades, reclining upon couches.*

It has been reported, that although there will be light in Paradise by which everything is seen, there will be no sun. The sun performs many functions in this world, most noticeably giving light and heat, and vital as these are, its light is too bright to look at directly and its heat can scorch. In Paradise the pleasant

effects of the sun will remain without the sun itself: there will be light, and there will also be cool shade, cast by an abundance of tall, lush trees on every side.

Its people will recline with their families upon comfortable, ornate couches draped with the finest fabrics. We can perhaps picture such furniture, having seen something like it in this world, but what Allāh has prepared is beyond everything found here; however it may be, it will be the most luxurious seat we have ever rested upon, and we will never wish to leave it.

ĀYAH 57

لَهُمْ فِيهَا فَاكِهَةٌ وَلَهُمْ مَا يَدَّعُونَ

57. For them therein is fruit, and for them is whatever they call for.

One of the greatest enjoyments of Paradise will be its foods, and especially its fruits. Elsewhere in the Qurʾān the fruits are described as hanging within arm's reach, the boughs bending low at all times, ready to be picked. The fruits will vary endlessly in shape, colour and taste, yet they will still resemble in appearance the fruits of this world, for Allāh knows that we would hesitate before foods that looked strange to us; only upon the first bite will the difference be realised, and each bite will be better than the last.

This world is a fast, a ṣawm, that we keep from the ḥarām, and Paradise will be our ifṭār.

Beyond the fruits, the enjoyment is unlimited, for its people will be able to call for anything they wish, whether an activity or a thing. Allāh uses the word *yad-daʿūn*, “they call for”, rather than “they ask for”, because asking is a request, and a request in this world can be refused; calling for something implies that it is already yours, showing how readily and instantly every wish will be granted.

There is a further subtlety binding these verses together. The people of Paradise were described in āyah 55 as *fākihūn*, literally “enjoying the fruits”, and here they are given *fākiha*, fruit itself. Now āyah 54 had just declared that people are recompensed only for what they used to do; and as everyone knows, fruit is the culmination of a tree’s labour, and stands as the natural metaphor for the result of any effort. The verses together suggest, that a person’s deeds in this world are sown like seeds in the field of the Hereafter, each good seed growing, by Allāh’s grace, into a tree heavy with fruit according to its worth and its sincerity; the blessings of Paradise are those fruits, and then, out of pure grace, Allāh grants its dwellers far more than they ever earned, so that they have whatever they desire and call for.

ĀYAH 58

سَلَامٌ قَوْلًا مِنْ رَبِّ رَحِيمٍ

58. “Peace”: a word from a Most Merciful Lord.

Ask anybody in Paradise what they long for above all, Muslim or otherwise, the Children of Isrā’īl or all mankind together, and the answer is the same: to see Allāh. Having mentioned the physical delights of its people, Allāh now mentions the greatest reward of all. He will greet them, either by means of the angels, or He may Himself appear before them, removing the veils between Him and the people of Janna and meeting them directly. When He appears, they will be unable to take their eyes from Him; and when He is veiled once more, His light will remain upon them, so that when they return to their homes their families will notice the change, and compliment them on the radiance they carry that they did not have when they left.

The seeing of Allāh will be the greatest reward of Paradise. Peerless as its bounties are, to meet the Lord we have worshipped and loved for scores of years without ever seeing Him will be a reunion worth every moment of the

wait. As for the manner of seeing Him, we cannot comprehend it, for Paradise is another world whose manner in all things is different; our powers in this world are limited in every sense, and we cannot imagine how Paradise itself will be, let alone how its Creator is.

ĀYAH 59

وَأَمْتَاٰزُوا الْيَوْمَ اَيْهَا الْمَجْرُمُوْنَ

59. "Separate yourselves today, O guilty ones!"

Just as before, Allāh turns the scene sharply again, this time from the people of Paradise to the people of the Fire, and the mood plunges from absolute bliss to despairing terror. As the people of Paradise are given passage to enter their abode, the people of the Fire will still be standing, and will be commanded to move aside, watching the fortunate dwellers of Paradise gather together and make their way home. They will be left in their own wretched company, to be punished together; for as it has come elsewhere in the Qurʾān and the ḥadīth, people will be grouped in the next world as they grouped themselves in this one.

We live together and eat together in this world, believer and denier side by side, but today, and the word "today" is used to make it immediate before our eyes, the wheat is parted from the chaff. So be careful whom you keep as company, and ask Allāh to protect you from being amongst the *mujrimūn*, and you will find yourself with the good. And let no one be deceived by the delay of punishment: sometimes the punishment of Allāh does not come at once, and the ungrateful and the disobedient live on without any open chastisement. This should not deceive them, nor serve as a validation of their ways, for Allāh says elsewhere, "*We opened for them the doors of everything,*" and it was the prelude to their seizure.

ĀYĀT 60–61

أَلَمْ أَعْهَدْ إِلَيْكُمْ يَا بَنِي آدَمَ أَنْ لَا تَعْبُدُوا الشَّيْطَانَ إِنَّهُ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ
مُبِينٌ

60. “Did I not instruct you, O Children of Adam, not to worship Shayṭān?
Indeed, he is an open enemy to you,

وَأَنْ اعْبُدُونِي هَذَا صِرَاطٌ مُسْتَقِيمٌ

61. and that you should worship Me? This is the straight path.”

Before they enter, Allāh will remind the inmates of the Fire of what they had been instructed: to follow the books and the prophets, and to shun the following of Shayṭān. Allāh knows full well that they were aware of this command; the question is asked to deepen their regret, for they knew they were wrong, and they should have known better, and listened.

By “worshipping Shayṭān” is meant obeying him, for worship in its essence entails obedience to the commands of the one worshipped. By choosing to disobey Allāh, they were not worshipping Him; and by choosing to obey Shayṭān, they became, in effect, his worshippers. The irony is, that Shayṭān never asked us to worship him; on the contrary, he openly declared that he would drag us to the Fire, and Allāh records his speech on the Day of Judgement, when the matter has been decided, disowning all who followed him. Despite this, we still follow him every time we sin.

Notice too the phrase “*this is the straight path*”, aṣ-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm. Remember it from the fourth āyah of this very sūra, where the Messenger ﷺ was declared to be upon it, and from Sūrat al-Fātiḥa, where we beg for it in every rak‘a

of our ṣalāh; on the Day of Judgement it will be announced, that the path we were begging to be shown was simply this, the worship of Allāh alone.

ĀYAH 62

وَلَقَدْ أَضَلَّ مِنْكُمْ جِبَلًا كَثِيرًا أَفَلَمْ تَكُونُوا تَعْقِلُونَ

62. “And he had already misled a great multitude of you. Were you not using your intelligence?”

Allāh reinforces the previous verses about the deceptions of Shayṭān. He reminds the inmates of the Fire, that they were not the first to fall prey to his plots; each of them knew the reality of Shayṭān, and what he had done to the nations before them, yet they did not use their intelligence, and abandoned their own good sense instead. The word *jibill* denotes an enormous mass of people, a mountain-load of them, all misled by an enemy whose enmity was never hidden.

If we ponder over this verse, we will realise that we are much the same: we know what is right and what is wrong, yet we still choose to follow Shayṭān and commit the wrong, despite knowing the consequences, and despite knowing that the pleasure of a sin never outweighs what it costs. This is nothing but foolishness, and a betrayal of the intelligence we were given.

ĀYĀT 63–64

هَذِهِ جَهَنَّمُ الَّتِي كُنْتُمْ تُوعَدُونَ

63. “This is Jahannam, of which you were continuously warned.

اَصْلَوْهَا الْيَوْمَ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَكْفُرُونَ

64. *Enter it today, because you used to continuously disbelieve.*

As the inmates of the Fire draw near to it in their companies, and stand upon the very brink of entering, these words will be said to them, sharpening their terror and their regret to the last degree. And here again is that word, al-yawm, “today”: it is here, it is now, the thing you were promised and dismissed for a lifetime stands before you. Let none of us be caught complacent, for the “today” of this verse was once as distant a tomorrow as ours is.

ĀYAH 65

الْيَوْمَ نَخْتِمُ عَلَىٰ أَفْوَاهِهِمْ وَتُكَلِّمُنَا أَيْدِيهِمْ وَتَشْهَدُ أَرْجُلُهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ

65. *Today We shall seal up their mouths, and their hands will speak to Us, and their legs will bear witness to what they used to earn.*

Having described the entry of the people of the Fire into their final abode, Allāh recounts what will have taken place earlier, whilst their deeds were being examined. Allāh will present their sins to them; but rather than relying only upon the book of deeds, which people might even dare to dispute, Allāh will seal their mouths so that they cannot excuse themselves, and their eyes, ears, skins, hands, feet and every other limb will testify to the deeds they committed.

It has been reported, that the people will claim the angels have recorded sins they never committed, and in one narration a man will demand of Allāh that no injustice be done to him, and declare that he will accept no witness but himself. At that moment his mouth will be sealed, and Allāh will command his

limbs to speak, and they will begin to testify against him; and when they have finished, he will be left a moment to take in what has happened, and he will only be able to cry out to his own body, “*Away with you, be gone! It was for you that I was defending!*”

ĀYAH 66

وَلَوْ نَشَاءُ لَطَمَسْنَا عَلَىٰ أَعْيُنِهِمْ فَاسْتَبَقُوا الصِّرَاطَ فَأَنَّىٰ يُبْصِرُونَ

66. *Had We willed, We could have wiped out their eyes; then they would race towards the path, but how would they see?*

Allāh has so far exhorted the disbelievers to believe in Him by reminding them of His power, His bounties, His reward and His Fire, and despite it all they have not changed their ways, but remained stubborn upon their beliefs. Yet Allāh allows them to keep the blessings He has provided them in this world, even as they show ingratitude. He mentions first, that had He willed, He could have taken away one of the most vital of those blessings, their sight. Without their vision they would stumble about, not knowing where they were heading; and it would have been an apt punishment for people who refuse to use their eyes to see the signs of Allāh.

Another interpretation is, that Allāh could have chosen to blind them to the true path for good, so that they would never again find their way towards Islam. He could make them blind to His signs, and seal their hearts upon disbelief, if they persist in their stubbornness and rebellion.

ĀYAH 67

وَلَوْ نَشَاءُ لَمَسَخْنَاهُمْ عَلَىٰ مَكَانَتِهِمْ فَمَا اسْتَطَاعُوا مُضِيًّا وَلَا
يَرْجِعُونَ

67. *And had We willed, We could have transfigured them where they stood;
then they could neither move on, nor go back.*

Just as Allāh warned the disbelievers that He could remove their power of sight, He warns them again, that He has the power to transfigure their forms into those of other creatures. They would then have no command of their newly transfigured bodies, unable to walk, talk, eat or work as before, ending in a miserable and inevitable death; and this is the greatest of humiliations.

The same had befallen nations before them, most notably the People of the Sabbath, whose story appears in detail in the Qurʾān: their punishment turned their whole community into apes, and being unable to live as apes, they perished within three days. Both of these verses, then, display how Allāh grants people respite to change their ways, whilst warning that a failure to do so can end in a state from which no change is ever again possible.

ĀYAH 68

وَمَنْ نُّعَمِّرْهُ نُنَكِّسْهُ فِي الْخَلْقِ أَفَلَا يَعْقِلُونَ

68. *And whomever We grant long life, We reverse him in his form. Do they
not then understand?*

Having issued the two warnings above, Allāh points out, that we can in fact witness minor forms of this transfiguration every day, and eventually in our

own selves. When a person ages, his bodily functions go into reverse: he becomes childlike in his thinking, his behaviour, his feebleness and fragility, his sight, his hearing, his health, his speed, and even, to an extent, his height. Allāh reminds the disbelievers, that just as He takes away our strength in old age, He is able to take it away in youth too.

The purpose of old age, and of the slow decline and weakening of the body, is to remind us that we will be leaving this world, and to allow us to prepare for the next. The first white hair is a sign of many to come, and a sign of death too. Had Allāh willed, He could have brought upon us all the signs of old age in a single stroke, but He favoured us by letting them set in gradually, so that they are easier to endure, yet still sufficient to move us to change our lives. The Messenger of Allāh ﷺ taught us to seek refuge in Allāh from being returned to the most abject stage of life, *ardhal al-umūr*, in which a man knows nothing after having known; so ask Allāh for protection from it. And consider the end of Abū Lahab, whose body was left rotting and cast aside by his own family: the strength and standing of this world desert every man who trusts in them.

ĀYAH 69

وَمَا عَلَّمْنَاهُ الشِّعْرَ وَمَا يَنْبَغِي لَهُ إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكْرٌ وَقُرْآنٌ مُبِينٌ

69. *And We did not teach him poetry, nor does it befit him. It is nothing but a Reminder and a clear Qur'ān.*

After consulting one another many times as to how they might halt the spread of Islam, one scheme the disbelievers of Makkah settled upon was to accuse the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ of being a poet, and the Qur'ān of being poetry. Allāh refutes the claim in this verse, as He does elsewhere in the Qur'ān. In Arabic, poetry follows strict rules, above all in its rhythm and its metres, and the Qur'ān, though it may sound poetic, fits neither the metres nor the styles of poetry. Notice too the turn of phrase, “*We did not teach him*”: Allāh is declar-

ing plainly that He Himself is the teacher of His Messenger ﷺ, and that poetry formed no part of what He taught.

The Messenger of Allāh ﷺ was of Quraysh, a people famed for their poetry, to the point that even their slaves were naturals at it; yet in his entire life he never composed a single couplet. His words may at times have rhymed, but there was never a deliberate attempt at verse, and even when he related the poetry of others, he would sometimes recite it imperfectly. Allāh had kept him away from poetry precisely so that nobody could accuse him of mastering it, and thereby accuse him of fabricating the Qurʾān. Consider in this light the story of Sayyidunā ʿUmar رضي الله عنه, who in the days before his Islam stood listening in the night to the recitation of the Prophet ﷺ, and thought to himself that this must be poetry, only for the Qurʾān itself to answer the thought in his heart as the recitation continued, until he confessed that this could be the word of neither poet nor soothsayer.

In short, poetry was a talent deliberately withheld from him, for his station is beyond such a pastime. His task was to show people realities, not to divert them with verse; poetry demands of its maker exaggeration, embellishment and at times outright falsehood in praise or blame, and the best of poetry is usually the most elaborate and the least real, which is contrary to the serious and truthful style of the Qurʾān. Nor was there ever any need to resort to poetry, though poetry can stir individuals and capture hearts, for the Qurʾān already possessed in itself every quality needed to win people over: its miraculous pull, its comprehensiveness and its beauty have never been matched. Poetry has never produced the likes of Abū Bakr رضي الله عنه, Imām al-Ghazālī and Imām Abū Ḥanīfa رحمه الله; the Qurʾān has.

ĀYAH 70

لِيُنذِرَ مَنْ كَانَ حَيًّا وَيَحِقَّ الْقَوْلُ عَلَى الْكَافِرِينَ

70. So that it may warn whoever is alive, and the Word may come true against the disbelievers.

“Whoever is alive” refers to those whose hearts are open and alive. When a person closes himself off to other ideas, he can never benefit from them, and in the same way the Qur’ān affects only those who are open to its effects and its ideas. If a person wishes to better himself, the Qur’ān will guide him; but if he has no desire to improve his life and his connection with Allāh, the Qur’ān will not yield to him the benefit it holds.

As for the second half of the verse, it answers to āyah 7 at the sūra’s opening, in which Allāh described how the disbelievers make their choice, and the events then unfold that turn their choice into their reality. The verse confirms, that if the disbelievers will not accept the Qur’ān, it simply stands as one more proof against them; and here, once again, is the symmetry of the sūra, for the warning of āyah 6, “so that you may warn a nation”, returns transformed, “so that it may warn whoever is alive”, teaching us that the warning was never merely for a nation of a particular place and time, but for every heart that still has life in it.

ĀYAH 71

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّا خَلَقْنَا لَهُمْ مِمَّا عَمِلَتْ أَيْدِينَا أَنْعَامًا فَهُمْ لَهَا مَالِكُونَ

71. Have they not seen that, from amongst what Our hands have made, We created cattle for them, and they became their owners?

Notice how the wording deliberately recalls āyah 35, where the fruits of the earth were things “*their hands did not make*”; here the cattle are things “*Our hands have made*”, and the contrast between the two hands is the whole argument. Allāh again reminds mankind of the favours He has laid upon them, and one immense favour is cattle, which we own, use and consume as and when we wish. Allāh points to the irony, that He is the one who created them, as He created everything, and yet we lay claim to His creations and dispose of them however we please; and despite this He allows it, expecting of us only gratitude in return.

The verse also shows, that it is not impossible for the disbelievers to change, for Allāh has made more powerful beings subservient to lesser ones. He created these animals large enough to attack and defy human beings, yet they do our bidding whenever we ask; and if such great beasts can be made obedient to man, why can meagre man not obey the Supreme Being, Allāh?

ĀYAH 72

وَذَلَّلْنَاهَا لَهُمْ فَمِنْهَا رَكُوبُهُمْ وَمِنْهَا يَأْكُلُونَ

72. *And We subdued them for them, so some of them they ride, and some of them they eat.*

Allāh continues the thought of the previous verse, describing how He has made these animals so subservient, that even a small child can order a camel to stand or to sit, and the camel will comply; and were there a train of a hundred camels roped in a line, they would all walk in single file without the driver facing any difficulty. Allāh is, as it were, displaying His animals before us: we do very little for them, yet Allāh does everything through them for us.

We own camels, which provide not only transport but carry our loads, and give us food and even drink; we have horses, donkeys, mules and even elephants for

riding; and for food we have goats, sheep and cattle, each providing its own kind of meat. All of this is owing purely to Allāh making such animals obedient, and not to any illusory power or authority of our own; and for this reason the pious have taken from this verse the practice of reciting it whenever an animal, or indeed any conveyance, under our control begins to slip out of our control.

ĀYAH 73

وَلَهُمْ فِيهَا مَنَافِعُ وَمَشَارِبُ أَفَلَا يَشْكُرُونَ

73. *And in them they have many benefits, and drinks. Will they not then be grateful?*

Allāh further unfolds the docile serviceability of these cattle. We take benefit from their wool, their skins and their fur, making from them our clothing and our dwellings, and we are at liberty to use all of this for any purpose, easily and without resistance from the animal.

One great benefit is the milk that some of them produce, namely the cow, the goat and the camel, and the production of milk is itself miraculous. Allāh explains in the Qurʾān, that it is a wonder how milk, a pure, white and wholesome drink, is drawn from animals filled with impurities, from between blood and filth. Consider what modern science has since described: the cow's special four-chambered stomach breaks down the grasses she eats; the first chamber softens the chewed plants, which she brings up and chews again several times; in the next, micro-organisms feed upon the material, producing energy and proteins; and as it passes through the remaining chambers into the intestine, the nutrients and water are absorbed into the bloodstream, circulate to the udder, and are there combined by special cells with sugars from her liver to create milk. Out of grass, blood and filth, by a route no man designed, comes the purest of drinks. Another meaning of the word *mashārib* is drinking ves-

sels, for water-skins are made from the leather of these animals to serve as containers.

The reason Allāh recounts these signs is twofold: to remind us of His favours so that we turn to Him, in the present; and to establish the argument against mankind in the future, if we are not grateful, for He spared nothing in providing for us.

ĀYĀT 74–75

وَاتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ آلِهَةً لَعَلَّهُمْ يُنصَرُونَ

74. *Yet they have taken gods other than Allāh, hoping that they might be helped.*

لَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ نَصْرَهُمْ وَهُمْ لَهُمْ جُنْدٌ مُحْضَرُونَ

75. *They cannot help them, whilst they stand for them as an army made ready.*

Having asked His servants for gratitude, Allāh laments, that far from being thankful for His blessings, His servants have gone the other way entirely, taking other beings as gods in the belief that these would help them. All those years in which Allāh alone was helping them, they never thought to worship Him; and now they ask help of beings that cannot help them in the least, praying to things that can neither hear them nor see them, and can be of no use to them in this world or the next.

Indeed, these very gods they had taken required help themselves. The disbelievers worshipped idols, and those same idols were prone to damage and needed constant maintenance; and whenever anyone reviled their idols, the

worshippers would flare with anger and rise at once to defend them, though the idols would never once do the same for them. Thus the second verse: the false gods cannot help their devotees, yet the devotees stand for their gods as a ready-mustered army. Another meaning of the verse is, that these false gods will be presented on the Day of Judgement, arrayed before the disbelievers like an opposing army, to testify against them, declaring that they never asked to be worshipped.

ĀYAH 76

فَلَا يَحْزَنكَ قَوْلُهُمْ إِنَّا نَعْلَمُ مَا يُسْرُونَ وَمَا يُعْلِنُونَ

76. So do not let their words grieve you. Indeed, We know what they conceal and what they declare.

Allāh consoles His Messenger ﷺ, telling him not to be grieved that the people reject him and call him such names as “sorcerer” and “poet”. The disbelievers called him a sorcerer because the Qur’ān would strike their hearts and cause their kin to abandon the religion of their fathers, as though the Qur’ān were magically breaking their households apart.

Though the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ would never willingly wish ill upon others, he was a human being, and felt all the emotions we feel, including sadness and pain, above all when he was being slandered. Allāh comforts him further, that He will hold the disbelievers to account for everything they say, and for everything they harbour in private.

ĀYAH 77

أَوَلَمْ يَرَ الْإِنْسَانُ أَنَّا خَلَقْنَاهُ مِنْ نُطْفَةٍ فَإِذَا هُوَ خَصِيمٌ مُبِينٌ

77. *Has man not seen that We created him from a drop, and behold, he is an open challenger?*

The remaining verses of Sūra Yāsīn deal with the arguments for the truth of the Hereafter, and in particular the resurrection. As mentioned earlier, the disbelievers found it difficult to accept the idea of being brought back to life after death and decomposition; and these verses were revealed in response to a particular incident, in which an enemy of Islam, Ubayy ibn Khalaf, crushed a decaying bone in his hand, and brought it before the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ, scattering its dust and demanding whether Allāh could resurrect even this.

The verse may carry two meanings. Primarily, it means that man was made from a drop of fluid, a mere building block and starting point; if Allāh can fashion a human being from something as small as the reproductive cell, why should it be difficult for Him to fashion him again, on the Day of Judgement, from his remaining fragments? The verse may also mean, that Allāh created man from something lowly, which leaves the body from a lowly place, and yet this same man has the audacity to stand and argue with Allāh about His power to resurrect.

How fitting here is the account related of the tābī'ī Muṭarrif ibn 'Abdillāh ibn al-Shikhhīr رحمه الله, who saw the commander al-Muhallab ibn Abī Ṣufra strutting proudly in a fine silken robe, and said to him, "O servant of Allāh, what is this gait, which Allāh detests?" Al-Muhallab replied, "Do you know who I am?" He said, "I know you well: your beginning was a despised drop, your end will be a rotten carcass, and in between you are carrying filth." And al-Muhallab went his way, and walked that walk no more. [Related by al-Qurṭubī]

ĀYAH 78

وَضَرَبَ لَنَا مَثَلًا وَنَسِيَ خَلْقَهُ قَالَ مَنْ يُحْيِي الْعِظَامَ وَهِيَ رَمِيمٌ

78. *And he strikes for Us a comparison, and forgets his own creation. He says, "Who will give life to bones when they have crumbled?"*

The comparison struck by Ubayy ibn Khalaf was to measure the power of Allāh by the power of men: since human beings cannot possibly regenerate a man from bone-dust, he assumed that Allāh could not either. His error is exposed in three words, *"and forgets his own creation"*.

By *"his own creation"* is meant the astonishing manner in which human life is brought into being. We were created from lifeless single cells, which divided and formed other cells, then limbs, and at last the full form of a child. If Allāh can create human beings by so careful and intricate a route the first time, why should it be difficult for Him to remake them, the easier way, at once?

ĀYAH 79

قُلْ يُحْيِيهَا الَّذِي أَنشَأَهَا أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ خَلْقٍ عَلِيمٌ

79. *Say: "He will give them life who brought them forth the first time, and He knows every creation full well."*

Recreating a thing is always easier than making it the first time. Allāh created us Himself, and He has not forgotten how our blueprint looks; He knows every creation still, and can recreate us in an instant. Indeed, as noted earlier, the second making should be the easier, for at least there will be fragments of our bodies lying about from which to remake us.

The word *ansha'ahā* deserves a moment's attention: *inshā'* is to raise and to grow a thing, as a child is raised into an adult, in perfect proportion at every stage, with no contribution from human hands. The One who has been growing you, cell by cell and year by year, since before your mother knew of you, is not going to be defeated by a handful of dust.

ĀYAH 80

الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُم مِّنَ الشَّجَرِ الْأَخْضَرِ نَارًا فَإِذَا أَنْتُمْ مِّنْهُ تُوقِدُونَ

80. *The One who made for you fire from the green tree, and behold, from it you kindle.*

Every tree whose wood is burnt for fire was at first green and full of water, and only as the wood dries does it catch flame easily. Allāh points out here, that if He can produce a thing from its opposite, fire from water-laden trees, then simply repeating the ordinary, forward act of creation is easier still. The green tree may also refer to two particular trees well known to the Arabs, the *markh* and the *'afār*, whose branches, when rubbed together, would spark like flintstones and kindle a fire even whilst green.

In either case, Allāh brings forth a thing from its opposite, and we see such opposites everywhere: the clouds are filled with water, yet produce fire in the form of lightning; water itself is essential for survival, yet it can bring death by drowning. Through all these examples we understand, that in just the same way, Allāh can bring life out of death.

ĀYAH 81

أَوَلَيْسَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ بِقَادِرٍ عَلَى أَنْ يَخْلُقَ
مِثْلَهُمْ بَلَىٰ وَهُوَ الْخَلَّاقُ الْعَلِيمُ

81. Is not the One who created the heavens and the earth able to create the likes of them? Certainly He is, and He is the Supreme Creator, the All-Knowing.

Allāh presses the argument with a still greater example. He created the seven heavens and the seven earths, and in their vastness, their diversity and all they contain, they are, relatively speaking, the harder creation, though nothing at all is hard for Allāh. If He can create such immensities, whose expanse runs from one edge of the universe to the other, and indeed beyond, how can it be difficult to understand, that He can create human beings from dust?

The verse closes with the intensive form al-Khallāq, not merely “Creator” but the Supreme, perpetually creating Creator, joined once more with al-‘Alīm, the All-Knowing, the same pairing of power and knowledge with which the sun’s course was sealed in āyah 38; for it is one thing to have power, and another to have the knowledge of every scattered atom of every human who ever lived, and Allāh possesses both.

ĀYAH 82

إِنَّمَا أَمْرُهُ إِذَا أَرَادَ شَيْئًا أَنْ يَقُولَ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ

82. His command, when He intends a thing, is only that He says to it, “Be,” and it is.

Allāh now describes His power in the most emphatic terms: whenever He wishes to bring a thing about, He needs to spend no time in doing it; it is as simple as saying to it “Be”, and it exists. In truth, even this word is mentioned only to help us understand how instantly His commands take effect, for in reality not even the word “Be” is required by Allāh: the moment He wills a thing, it occurs, without delay, without effort and without fail. The like of it appears in Sūrat al-Nahl, *إِنَّمَا قَوْلُنَا لِشَيْءٍ إِذَا أَرَدْنَاهُ أَنْ نَقُولَ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ*, “Our word to a thing, when We intend it, is only that We say to it, ‘Be,’ and it is.”

Consider how freely His creative command moves outside every rule we imagine to be fixed. Ādam عليه السلام was created without male or female; Hawwā عليها السلام was created from a male with no female; ‘Īsā عليه السلام was created from a female with no male; and we require both a mother and a father, whilst some couples try for years and are given nothing. And His command governs not only creation but the very natures of things: He spoke to the fire and it became cool for Ibrāhīm عليه السلام, the knife would not cut for Ismā‘īl عليه السلام, and stones fell in place of rain upon the army of Abraha. The One whose word suspends fire and blade will find no difficulty in a word that raises the dead.

ĀYAH 83

فَسُبْحَانَ الَّذِي بِيَدِهِ مَلَكُوتُ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ

83. So pure is the One in whose hand is the vast dominion of everything, and to Him you will be returned.

In this final verse Allāh summarises the entire sūra, its core ideas, and life itself, in two clauses: He is the Master and Owner of everything He has created, which means that we must live our lives according to His wishes; and we will all return to Him after we die, to be resurrected and to have our deeds examined.

Notice that Allāh uses the word *malakūt*, rather than the word *mulk*. In Arabic, additional letters carry additional meaning: *mulk* denotes a kingdom of whatever size, whereas *malakūt* denotes a kingdom of immense magnitude, as the universe truly is; and it is the fitter choice here, for Allāh has just spoken of the vastness of the heavens and the earths. And notice, finally, that the sūra which opened with *subhān* in the middle of its signs, “*Pure is He who created all the pairs*,” now closes upon the same word, so that the last breath of the sūra, like its whole argument, is the declaration that nothing is like Him.

With this, the commentary of Sūra Yāsīn is complete. May Allāh make us amongst those who recite this sūra, understand it, live by it and are ushered by it into the company of Ḥabīb al-Najjār and all the honoured ones. Whatever is correct in these notes is from Allāh alone, and whatever error they contain is from myself and from Shayṭān; may Allāh overlook it, and accept this small effort of mine. Āmīn.

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي بَعِزَّتْهُ وَجَلَّالَهُ تَمُّ الصَّالِحَاتِ

All praise belongs to Allāh, by whose might and majesty all good works are completed.



Appendix: The Symmetry of Sūra Yāsīn

For the reader who wishes to see the architecture of the sūra at a glance, the mirrored themes discussed in the course of the commentary are gathered here. The sūra opens and closes upon the same three assertions: that the Qurʾān is no human composition, that the Prophet’s ﷺ task is only to warn, and that the resurrection is real; and the story of the town at its centre replays the sūra’s opening address to the Prophet ﷺ, word by word, in the lives of three of his brother messengers. He who reads the sūra daily is walking, morning after morning, through a building whose every doorway faces another; and the more familiar its halls become, the more plainly he sees that no human hand drew its plan.

THEME	AT THE OPENING	AT THE CLOSE
The Qurʾān is not the word of a man	وَالْقُرْآنَ الْحَكِيمَ Āyah 2: it is <i>ḥakīm</i> , wise and firmly built	وَمَا عَلَّمَهُ الشِّعْرَ Āyah 69: it is not poetry, and he ﷺ is no poet
The Prophet’s ﷺ task is to warn	لِتُنذِرَ قَوْمًا Āyah 6: to warn a nation never warned	لِيُنذِرَ مَنْ كَانَ حَيًّا Āyah 70: to warn whoever is alive of heart
The resurrection is real	إِنَّا نَحْنُ نُحْيِي الْمَوْتَىٰ Āyah 12: “Surely <i>We</i> bring the dead to life”	قُلْ يُحْيِيهَا الَّذِي أَنشَأَهَا Āyah 79: “ <i>He</i> will give them life who brought them forth the first time”
Glad tidings for the believer	فَبَشِّرْهُ بِمَغْفِرَةٍ وَأَجْرٍ كَرِيمٍ Āyah 11: forgiveness and a generous reward	بِمَا غَفَرَ لِي رَبِّي وَجَعَلَنِي مِنَ الْمُكْرَمِينَ Āyāt 26–27: “ <i>my Lord</i> has forgiven me and placed me amongst the honoured”

All gathered before Allāh	وَأَنْ كُلُّ لَمَّا جَمِيعٌ لَدَيْنَا مُحْضَرُونَ Āyah 32: “every one of them will be brought before Us”	فَإِذَا هُمْ جَمِيعٌ لَدَيْنَا مُحْضَرُونَ Āyah 53: “at once they will all be brought together before Us”
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A Note on Sources

The rendering of the āyāt into English follows the plain, verse-by-verse translation prepared for the original study circle, lightly revised for consistency. Aḥādīth are cited, where numbered, by the standard editions of the collections: Tirmidhī, Dārimī, and al-Bazzār; narrations on the virtues of the sūra that are related without number are cited through the commentary in which they appear, principally al-Jāmi‘ li-Aḥkām al-Qur’ān of al-Qurṭubī.

The works of tafsīr drawn upon in these notes include Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr; al-Jāmi‘ li-Aḥkām al-Qur’ān of al-Qurṭubī; al-Taḥrīr wa’l-Tanwīr of Ibn ‘Āshūr; Fī Zilāl al-Qur’ān of Sayyid Quṭb; and Ma‘ārif al-Qur’ān of Muftī Muḥammad Shafī‘, together with points of linguistic analysis gathered in the course of study. The remarks of Ibn al-Qayyim on the purpose of worship are drawn from his discussions on tawḥīd. Where the scholars differ, the difference has been recorded, and where the matter has been left ambiguous by Allāh, it has been left ambiguous here too.