

SŪRAH 91

Al-Shams

(The Sun)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

By the sun and his morning brightness, (1)

وَالشَّمْسِ وَضُحَاهَا ﴿١﴾

by the moon as she follows him, (2)

وَالْقَمَرِ إِذَا تَلَّهَا ﴿٢﴾

by the day, which reveals his splendour, (3)

وَالنَّهَارِ إِذَا جَلَّهَا ﴿٣﴾

by the night, which veils him. (4)

وَاللَّيْلِ إِذَا يَغْشَاهَا ﴿٤﴾

By the heaven and its construction, (5)

وَالسَّمَاءِ وَمَا بَنَاهَا ﴿٥﴾

by the earth and its spreading, (6)

وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا طَحَاهَا ﴿٦﴾

by the soul and its moulding (7)

وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا ﴿٧﴾

*and inspiration with knowledge of wickedness
and righteousness. (8)*

فَأَلْهَمَهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا ﴿٨﴾

Successful is the one who keeps it pure, (9)

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا ﴿٩﴾

and ruined is the one who corrupts it. (10)

*In their overweening arrogance the people of
Thamūd denied the truth, (11)*

when their most hapless wretch broke forth. (12)

*God's Messenger said to them: 'It is a she-camel
belonging to God, so let her have her drink.' (13)*

*But they rejected him, and cruelly slaughtered her.
For this their sin their Lord let loose His scourge
upon them, and razed their city to the ground.
(14)*

He does not fear what may follow. (15)

وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسَّهَا ﴿٩﴾

كَذَّبَتْ ثَمُودُ بِطَغْوَاهَا ﴿١١﴾

إِذِ انْبَعَثَ أَشْقَاهَا ﴿١٢﴾

فَقَالَ لَهُمْ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ نَاقَةَ اللَّهِ وَسُقْيَاهَا ﴿١٣﴾

﴿١٤﴾

فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَعَقَرُوهَا فَدَمْدَمَ عَلَيْهِمْ رَبُّهُمْ ﴿١٤﴾

بِذُنُوبِهِمْ فَسَوَّاهَا ﴿١٥﴾

وَلَا يَخَافُ عُقْبَاهَا ﴿١٥﴾

Overview

This *sūrah*, which maintains the same rhyme in all its verses and keeps the same musical beat throughout, starts with several aesthetic touches which seem to spring out from the surrounding universe and its phenomena. These phenomena form the framework which encompasses the great truth which is the subject matter of the *sūrah*, namely, the nature of man, his inherent abilities, choice of action, and responsibility in determining his own fate.

This *sūrah* also refers to the story of the Thamūd and their negative attitude to the warnings they received from God's messenger, to their killing of the she-camel, and finally their complete annihilation. This provides an example of the unpromising prospects which await those who corrupt their souls instead of keeping them pure and who do not confine themselves within the limits of piety. "Successful is the one who keeps it pure, and ruined is the one who corrupts it." (Verses 9-10)

God's Solemn Oath

*By the sun and his morning brightness, by the moon as she follows him, by the day,
which reveals his splendour, by the night, which veils him. By the heaven and its*

construction, by the earth and its spreading, by the soul and its moulding and inspiration with knowledge of wickedness and righteousness. Successful is the one who keeps it pure, and ruined is the one who corrupts it. (Verses 1-10)

God swears by these objects and universal phenomena as He swears by the human soul, how it is fashioned and the inspiration it receives. The oath gives these creatures an added significance and draws man's attention to them. Man ought to contemplate these phenomena and try to appreciate their value and the purpose of their creation.

There exists in fact, some kind of a special language through which the human heart communicates with the universe. This language is part of human nature. It is a language which does not use sounds and articulation. It is a communication to hearts and an inspiration to souls which come alive whenever man looks up to the universe for an inspiring or cheerful sight. Hence, the Qur'ān frequently urges man to reflect upon his surroundings. It does this in various ways, sometimes directly and sometimes with hints, incidental touches and stimuli. In this case, for example, some phenomena of the universe are made the subject of God's oath, in order to serve as a framework for what follows in the *sūrah*. These explicit directives and indirect hints are very frequent in the *sūrahs* of the present volume. There is hardly any *sūrah* which does not encourage man, in one way or another, to communicate with the universe, in secret language, so that he may appreciate its signs and understand its address.

Here we have an inspiring oath by the sun and the mid-morning. The oath also specifies the time when the sun rises above the horizon, when it is indeed at its most beautiful. Indeed, mid-morning is, in winter, a time of refreshing warmth. In summer, it is a time when the atmosphere is just mild and fresh before the blazing heat of midday sets in, and the sun is at its clearest.

The oath is also by the moon as she follows the sun and spreads her beautiful and clear light. Between the moon and the human heart there is an age-long fascination that is well established in men's inmost souls. It is a fascination that is born anew every time the two meet. The moon issues her own special whispers and inspirations to the human heart, and she sings her songs of praise of God, the Creator. On a clear night, one can almost feel oneself sailing through the moonlight, clearing one's worries and enjoying perfect bliss as one feels the hand of the Maker beyond this perfect creation.

God also swears by the day as it reveals the sun. The Arabic wording of this verse, *wan-nahāri idhā jallāhā*, makes the possessive pronoun attached to 'splendour' ambiguous. Initially, one tends to take it as if it refers to the sun. The general context, however, suggests that it refers to the earth as it is lit by the sun. This method of

changing referents is widely employed in the Qur'ān when the change is easily noticed and the subject matter familiar. Here we have a discreet allusion to the fact that sunlight reveals the earth and has a great effect on human life. Our familiarity with the sun and its light makes us tend to overlook its beauty and function. This Qur'ānic hint alerts us anew to this magnificent daily spectacle.

The same applies to the next verse, *"by the night, which veils him."* (Verse 4) This is the opposite of what happens during the day. Night time is like a screen that covers and hides everything. It also leaves its own impressions on everyone, and its impact on human life is no less important than that of the day time.

God then swears *"by the heaven and its construction."* (Verse 5) When heaven is mentioned, our immediate thoughts go to the huge dome-like sky above us in which we see the stars and the planets moving, each in its orbit. But we are in fact uncertain of the exact nature of heaven. However, what we see above us does bear the idea of building and construction because it looks to us a firm and solid whole. As to how it is built and what keeps it together as it floats in infinite space, we have no answer. All that has been advanced in this field is only theory that is liable to be invalidated or modified. We are certain, however, that God's hand is the one which holds this structure together, as emphasized elsewhere in the Qur'ān: *"It is God who upholds the heavens and the earth lest they collapse. Should they collapse none could uphold them after He will have ceased to do so."* (35: 41) This is the only definite and absolute truth about the matter.

The oath then includes the earth and its spreading as preparatory to the emergence of life. Indeed, human and animal life would not have been possible had the earth not been spread out. It is indeed the special characteristics and the natural laws which God has incorporated in the making of this earth that make life on it possible, according to His will and plan. It appears that if any of these laws were violated or upset, life on earth would become impossible or change its course. The most important of these is perhaps the spreading out of the earth which is also mentioned in *Sūrah 79, The Pluckers*: *"After that He spread out the earth. He brought out water from it, and brought forth its pastures."* (79: 3031) When the *sūrah* mentions the spreading out of the earth, it actually reminds us of God's hand which brought this about.

A Look into the Human Soul

The *sūrah* moves on to state the basic truth about man, and relates this truth to the various phenomena of the universe, for man is one of the most remarkable wonders in this harmonious creation: *"By the soul and its moulding and inspiration with knowledge of wickedness and righteousness. Successful is the one who keeps it pure, and*

ruined is the one who corrupts it.” (Verses 7-10)

The basis of the Islamic concept of human psychology is outlined in these four verses, along with verse 10 of the preceding *sūrah*, The City, “*And [We have] shown him the two paths,*” and verse 3 in *Sūrah* 76, Man, which says: “*We have shown him the right path, be he grateful or ungrateful.*” They supplement the verses which point out the duality in man’s make-up in *Sūrah* 38, *Ṣād*, which says: “*Your Lord said to the angels, ‘I am creating man from clay. When I have fashioned him, and breathed of My spirit into him, kneel down and prostrate yourselves before him.’”* (38: 71-72) These verses also supplement and relate to the verses which define man’s responsibility and accountability for his actions, such as the one in *Sūrah* 74, The Cloaked One, which reads: “*Everyone is held in pledge for whatever he has wrought,*” and the verse in *Sūrah* 13, Thunder, which states that God’s attitude to man is directly related to man’s own behaviour: “*God does not change a people’s lot until they change what is in their hearts.*” (13: 11) These and similar verses define the Islamic view of man with perfect clarity.

God has created man with a duality of nature and ability. What we mean by duality is that the two ingredients in his make-up, i.e. earth’s clay and God’ spirit, form within him two equal tendencies to good or evil, to either follow divine guidance or go astray. Man is just as capable of recognizing the good as he is of recognizing the evil in everything he encounters, and he is equally capable of directing himself one way or the other. This dual ability is deeply ingrained within him. All external factors, like divine messages, only serve to awaken his ability and help it take its chosen way. In other words, these factors do not create this innate ability; they only help it to develop.

In addition to his innate ability, man is equipped with a conscious faculty which determines his line of action. Hence, he is responsible for his actions and decisions. He who uses this faculty to strengthen his inclinations to what is good and to purify himself and to weaken his evil drive will be prosperous and successful. By contrast, a person who uses this faculty to suppress the good in him will ruin himself: “*Successful is the one who keeps it pure, and ruined is the one who corrupts it.*” (Verses 9-10)

There must be, then, an element of responsibility attached to man’s conscious faculty and freedom of choice. Since he is free to choose between his tendencies, his freedom must be coupled with responsibility. He is assigned a definite task related to the power given to him. But God, the Compassionate, does not leave man with no guidance other than his natural impulses or his conscious, decision-making faculty. God helps him by sending him messages which lay down accurate and permanent criteria, and points out to him the signs, within him and in the world at large, which should help him choose the right path and clear his way of any obstructions so that he can see the truth. Thus, he recognizes his way easily and clearly and his conscious

decision-making faculty functions in full knowledge of the nature of the direction it chooses and the implications of that choice.

This is what God has willed for man and whatever takes place within this framework is a direct fulfilment of His will.

From this very general outline of the Islamic concept of man emerge a number of vital and valuable facts: firstly, that this concept elevates man to the high position of being responsible for his actions and allows him freedom of choice, within the confines of God's will that has granted him this freedom. Responsibility and freedom of choice, therefore, make man the honoured creature of this world, a position worthy of the creature in whom God has blown something of His own spirit and whom He has made with His own hand and raised above most of His creation

Secondly, it puts man's fate in his own hands – according to God's will as already explained – and makes him responsible for it. This stimulates caution in him as well as a positive sense of fear of God. For he knows then that God's will is fulfilled through his own actions and decisions: *"God does not change a people's lot until they change what is in their hearts."* (13: 11) This is in itself a great responsibility which demands that one should always be alert.

Thirdly, it reminds man of his permanent need to refer to the criteria fixed by God in order to ensure that his desires do not get the better of him. Thus man stays near to God, follows His guidance and illuminates his way by divine light. Indeed, the standard of purity man can achieve is limitless.

Historical Example

The *sūrah* then gives an example of the failure which befalls those who corrupt themselves, and erect a barrier between themselves and divine guidance: *"In their overweening arrogance the people of Thamūd denied the truth, when their most hapless wretch broke forth. God's Messenger said to them: 'It is a she-camel belonging to God, so let her have her drink.' But they rejected him, and cruelly slaughtered her. For this their sin their Lord let loose His scourge upon them, and razed their city to the ground. He does not fear what may follow."* (Verses 11-15)

The story of the Thamūd and their messenger, Ṣāliḥ, is mentioned several times in the Qur'ān. A discussion of it is given every time it occurs. The reader may refer for further details to the commentary on *Sūrah* 89, The Dawn, in this volume. The present *sūrah*, however, states that the people of Thamūd rejected their prophet and accused him of lying simply because they were arrogant and insolent. Their transgression is represented here by the most hapless wretch among them rushing to slaughter the she-camel. He is the most wretched as a result of his crime. Their

messenger had warned them in advance, saying, “*It is a she-camel belonging to God, so let her have her drink.*” This was his condition when they asked him for a sign. The sign was that the she-camel had the water for herself one day and left it for the rest of the cattle the next day. The she-camel must have had something else peculiar to her, but we shall not go into detail because God has not told us about it. The Thamūd, however, did not heed their messenger’s warnings but killed the she-camel. The person who perpetrated the crime, the arch sinner, is the most-wretched, but they were all held responsible because they did not take him to task. On the contrary, they applauded what he did. A basic principle of Islam is that society bears a collective responsibility in this life. This does not conflict with the principle of individual responsibility in the hereafter when everyone is answerable for his own deeds. It is a sin, however, not to counsel and urge one another to adhere to what is good and not to punish evil and transgression.

As a result of the Thamūd’s arrogance and their outrageous crime, a calamity befell them: “*For this their sin their Lord let loose His scourge upon them, and razed their city to the ground.*” (Verse 14) The Arabic verse uses the verb *damdama* for ‘let loose His scourge’, which creates, by its repetitiveness, an added feeling of horror, as we learn that the city was completely razed to the ground.

“*He does not fear what may follow.*” (Verse 15) All praises and glorification be to Him. Whom, what and why should He fear?

The meaning aimed at here is what the statement entails: he who does not fear the consequences punishes most severely. This is true of God’s punishment.

In conclusion, we say the *sūrah* provides a link between the human soul, the basic facts of the universe, its constant and repetitive scenes and God’s unfailing law of punishing tyrant transgressors. This He does according to His own wise planning which sets a time for everything and a purpose for every action. He is the Lord of man, the universe and fate.