

SŪRAH 86
Al-Ṭāriq
(The Night Visitor)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

By the heaven and by the night visitor. (1)

وَالسَّمَاءِ وَالطَّارِقِ ﴿١﴾

Would that you knew what the night visitor is!
(2)

وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا الطَّارِقُ ﴿٢﴾

It is the star that pierces through darkness. (3)

النَّجْمِ الثَّاقِبِ ﴿٣﴾

For every soul there is a guardian who watches over it. (4)

إِنَّ كُلَّ نَفْسٍ لَّمَّا عَلَيْهَا حَافِظٌ ﴿٤﴾

Let man then reflect: of what he is created. (5)

فَلْيَنْظُرِ الْإِنْسَانُ مِمَّ خُلِقَ ﴿٥﴾

He is created of gushing water; (6)

خُلِقَ مِنْ مَّاءٍ دَافِقٍ ﴿٦﴾

he issues from between the loins and the chest bones. (7)

تَخْرُجُ مِنْ بَيْنِ الصُّلْبِ وَالتَّرَائِبِ ﴿٧﴾

God is well able to bring him back [to life]. (8)

إِنَّهُ عَلَى رَجْعِهِ لَقَادِرٌ ﴿٨﴾

On the day when consciences are tried, (9)

يَوْمَ تُبْلَى السَّرَائِرُ ﴿٩﴾

man shall be helpless, with no supporter. (10)

By the heaven with its returning rain, (11)

by the earth ever splitting with verdure, (12)

this is surely a decisive word; (13)

it is no idle talk. (14)

They devise many an artful scheme, (15)

but I too have My schemes. (16)

*So give respite to the unbelievers; leave them alone
for a while. (17)*

فَمَا لَهُ مِنْ قُوَّةٍ وَلَا نَاصِرٍ ﴿١٠﴾

وَالسَّمَاءِ ذَاتِ الرَّجْعِ ﴿١١﴾

وَالْأَرْضِ ذَاتِ الصَّدْعِ ﴿١٢﴾

إِنَّهُ لَقَوْلٌ فَصْلٌ ﴿١٣﴾

وَمَا هُوَ بِأَهْزَلٍ ﴿١٤﴾

إِنَّهُمْ يَكِيدُونَ كَيْدًا ﴿١٥﴾

وَأَكِيدُ كَيْدًا ﴿١٦﴾

فَمَهْلٍ الْكَافِرِينَ أَمْهَلُهُمْ رُوَيْدًا ﴿١٧﴾

Overview

It is stated in the introduction to the first *sūrah* in this volume, which forms the thirtieth part of the Qur'ān, that its *sūrahs* are "like a persistent and strong knocking on a door, or a series of loud shouts seeking to awaken those who are fast asleep, or those who are drunk and have lost consciousness, or are in a night club, completely absorbed in their dancing or entertainment. The knocks and the shouts come one after the other: Wake up! Look around you! Think! Reflect! There is a God! There is planning, trial, liability, reckoning, reward, severe punishment and lasting bliss."

The present *sūrah* is a typical example of these qualities. Its tone is sharp. The scenes portrayed, the rhythm chosen, the sounds of the individual words and their meanings — all contribute to this sharpness of tone. The scenes include the night visitor, the star piercing with brightness, the gushing water, the returning rain and the splitting earth. The meanings include watching over souls: "For every soul there is a guardian who watches over it"; the lack of strength and help: "On the day when consciences are tried, man shall be helpless, with no supporter"; the complete seriousness:

“This is surely a decisive word; it is no idle talk.” The same characteristics apply to the warnings given in this *sūrah*: *“They devise many an artful scheme, but I too have My schemes. So give respite to the unbelievers; leave them alone for a while.”*

There is complete harmony between the scenes of the universe portrayed in the *sūrah* and the facts it states. This harmony becomes abundantly clear when the *sūrah* is carefully considered.

A Special Type of Visitor

“By the heaven and by the night visitor. Would that you knew what the night visitor is! It is the star that pierces through darkness. For every soul there is a guardian who watches over it.” (Verses 1-4) This oath includes a scene of the universe and a fact of faith. It opens by mentioning heaven and the night visitor and follows with a form of exclamation made familiar in the Qur’ān; *“Would that you knew what the night visitor is!”* (Verse 2) This exclamation gives the impression that it is mysterious, beyond explanation.

The Qur’ān then states its nature and form: *“It is the star that pierces through darkness.”* (Verse 3) Its powerful, penetrating rays travel at speed through the surrounding darkness. The description applies to all stars. There is no need to attach it to a particular one. Generality is more useful in this kind of context. Thus, the meaning sounds as follows: By heaven and its stars which pierce darkness and penetrate through that veil covering all things. Thus, this reference sheds its own light on the facts outlined in this *sūrah* and the scenes it portrays.

God swears by heaven and its piercing stars that every soul has an observer appointed by Him to watch over it: *“For every soul there is a guardian who watches over it.”* (Verse 4) This implies a strong assertion that there is an agent appointed by God to watch over every soul and keep a record of its actions and thoughts. The watch is over the soul because it is there that thoughts and secrets which are responsible for action and reward lie. Thus, people are not left to roam about the earth as they wish. On the contrary, an accurate and immediate record is kept, on the basis of which reckoning is made.

This awesome inference becomes clear as the soul feels that it is never alone even when without company. There is always the watcher who remains nearby even when one hides from all and is secure against any visitor or intruder. There is still the watcher who penetrates all covers and has access to all things concealed, in the same way as the piercing star tears through the night cover. For God’s method of creation is the same with regard to human souls and the wide horizons.

Man’s Humble Origin

This opening touch, which unites the human soul with the universe, is followed by another which emphasizes the truth of organized creation and deliberate planning to which God has sworn by the heaven and the night visitor. The early stages of man's creation constitute a proof of this fact and suggest that man is not forgotten as something insignificant: *"Let man then reflect: of what he is created. He is created of gushing water; he issues from between the loins and the chest bones."* (Verses 5-7)

Let man consider his origins and what has become of him. It is a very wide gulf which divides the origins from the final product, the gushing water from man the intelligent, rational being with his highly sophisticated organic, neurological, mental and psychological systems. The reference to this great gulf which the gushing water crosses in order to be made into a communicating being suggests that there is a power beyond the province of man which moves that shapeless and powerless fluid along its remarkable and impressive journey until it is shaped into its magnificent ultimate form. It implies that there is a guardian appointed by God to look after that moist germ, and to guide it through its remarkable journey.

This one fertilizing cell, of which there are millions in every gush, is hardly visible under the microscope. It is a creature without support, reason or will. But as soon as it settles in the womb it proceeds to search for food. The guarding hand of God equips it with a quality which enables it to convert the lining of the womb around it into a pool of blood, thus supplying it with fresh nourishment. Once it is sure of the availability of food it starts another process of continuous division to produce new cells. This shapeless and powerless creature which has no reason or will, knows exactly what it is doing and what it wants. The guarding hand watching over it provides it with guidance, knowledge, power and will to enable it to know its way. It is charged with the task of making every group of newly produced cells specialize in building a part of the magnificent structure of the human body. One group proceeds to produce the skeleton; another group forms the muscles; a third the nervous system; a fourth the lymphatic system. The same applies to every major part of the human structure. But the matter is not as simple as that: it involves a higher degree of specialization; for every bone, every muscle and every nerve is unique and dissimilar to every other. The structure is accurately planned, and has a wide range of functions. Hence, as every group of cells proceeds to fulfil its appointed task in building this structure, it learns to break up into specialized subdivisions, each having its particular function in the general set up. Every little cell proceeds knowing its way, destination and function. Those cells entrusted with the task of forming the eye know that the eye must be in the face, and that it cannot be situated in the abdomen or the foot or the arm, despite the fact that any of these localities is a suitable place for forming an eye. If the first cell charged with making the eye was taken off course and planted in any of these localities, it would have fulfilled its

mission and made an eye there. But when it sets out on its mission it simply goes to the exact spot specified for the eye. Who then has told this cell that this structure needs its eye to be in that particular spot? It is God the watching Guardian who guides it, looks after it and shows it its way.

All the cells work individually and collectively within a framework set for them by certain elements functioning inside the cells. These elements are known as the genes which preserve the general characteristics of the species and the distinctive traits of the parents and forefathers. When the eye cell divides and proliferates in order to form the eye, it endeavours at the same time to preserve its shape and particular features so that it turns out to be a human eye and not the eye of an animal. Furthermore, it endeavours to make it an eye of a human whose forefathers had certain features and characteristics distinguishing their eyes. The slightest error in designing that eye, whether in shape or qualities, forces the forming cell out of its set course. So who has endowed power, ability and knowledge to this insignificant cell which has no reason, will or power of its own? It is God who taught it to design and produce what all mankind can never design or produce. For man cannot design an eye or a part of it, even if charged with this task, while an insignificant cell or group of cells in the body can accomplish this great mission.

This is merely a quick glance at parts of the remarkable journey which transforms the gushing water into the communicative human being. But there is indeed a great multitude of wonders in the physiological functions of the various organs and systems. It is beyond the scope of this work to trace these wonders but they all constitute evidence of elaborate planning and organization and bear the stamp of God's guarding, helping and guiding hand. They emphasize the first fact in the *sūrah* sworn to by the heaven and the night visitor, and prepare for the next fact, namely, the resurrection, which was denied by the idolaters who were among the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān.

"God is well able to bring him back [to life]. On the day when consciences are tried, man shall be helpless, with no supporter." (Verses 8-10) God, who has created him and looked after him, is well able to bring him back to life after death. The first creation is evidence of His ability as well as His elaborate planning and organization. Unless there is a return in order to accord everyone his or her fair reward then this highly sophisticated and wise creation would be in vain. *"On the day when consciences are tried."* (Verse 9). The Arabic terms, *tublā* and *sarā'ir* used by the Qur'ān have much wider connotations than conscience and trial. They suggest that that part of the human soul where secrets are safely deposited will be thrown open, searched and exposed in the same way as the night visitor penetrates the covering darkness of the night. As the guarding watcher penetrates through the soul hidden under multiple covers, secrets are examined and man finds himself powerless and without support:

“Man shall be helpless, with no supporter.” (Verse 10) Standing bare without cover and strength adds to the strains and hardships of the situation. This has a deep effect on the reader’s perception, as it moves from talking of the universe and the human soul to man’s creation and his remarkable journey, until he reaches the end when his secrets are exposed and he stands alone, powerless, without support.

A Powerful Discourse

There may be some lingering doubts within some people’s minds that this could happen. Therefore, the *sūrah* gives an oath to its seriousness. It adds a link between this assertion and the universe at large, as we saw at the opening of the *sūrah*: *“By the heaven with its returning rain, by the earth ever splitting with verdure, this is surely a decisive word; it is no idle talk.”* (Verses 11-14)

The rain which comes from the sky again and again and the vegetation which splits the earth and springs forth are two images describing one of the many manifestations of life, the life of plants and their origins. Water which pours down from heaven and verdure which springs out from the earth, are akin to the infant coming into the world, passing between the loins springing out from the darkness of the womb. It is the same life, the same scene, the same movement. It is one system pointing to the Maker who has no competitors.

The image of rain and verdure is not dissimilar to that of the night visitor, the piercing star as it splits covers and curtains. It is also similar to the scene depicting consciences being searched and all that is concealed being thrown open. It is again the same sort of structure which tells of the Maker. God swears by these two creations and their two events, the heaven of returning rains and the earth splitting with verdure. The impact of the scene portrayed combines with the rhythm to strike a strong note of finality and decisiveness. The oath is that this word, or the Qur’ān generally, which states that people will return to life so as to face a trial, is the decisive word which admits of no frivolity. It puts an end to all argument, doubts and uncertainties. It is a true and final word, to which both the heaven of the returning rain and the earth splitting with verdure are witnesses

When this final statement of return and trial is made, there follows an address to God’s Messenger. At the time of revelation he had only a few believers who supported him in Makkah. They were suffering the brunt of the idolaters’ hostility and their plots against the Islamic message. The idolaters were tirelessly trying to smother the call. The address is made to the Prophet so as to encourage and reassure him, and to disparage what the schemers devise. It states that their scheming is only temporary; the battle is in God’s hands and under His command. So, let the Prophet persevere and be patient, and let him and the believers be reassured: *“They devise*

many an artful scheme, but I too have My schemes. So give respite to the unbelievers; leave them alone for a while.” (Verses 15-17)

Those who were created from gushing water, then issued between the loins, brought forth without any strength, ability or will of their own, guided along their long journey by divine power and destined to that return when secrets are searched and tried and where they have no strength or support – are devising a scheme against the Prophet and the Muslims! I, the Creator who guides, preserves, directs, brings back to life and puts to trial; the Almighty; the Victor who has made the sky, the night visitor, the gushing water and man; the Maker of the heaven with its returning rain and the earth splitting with verdure; I, God, am devising a scheme of My own. So, there are the two schemes and the battle. It is, in truth, a one-sided battle but described as being between two sides for the sake of sarcasm.

“So give respite to the unbelievers; leave them alone for a while.” (Verse 17) Do not be impatient. Do not precipitate the end of the battle when you have seen its true nature. There is wisdom behind this respite and delay which is short even though it may take up the whole length of this first life; for how short this life appears when compared with a life of limitless duration.

God’s benevolent and compassionate attitude to His Messenger is noticeable in the final verse: *“So give respite to the unbelievers; leave them alone for a while.”* He is addressed here as if he were the final authority, or as if he were the one who decides or approves that they may take a short respite. But the Prophet has no such authority; it is merely an expression of kind and benevolent tenderness which bestows compassion on his heart. It is divine kindness which suggests that God’s Messenger has a say in the whole matter as if he had a share or interest in it. It lifts all barriers between the Prophet and the divine domain, where all matters are judged and settled.