

# THE STUDY QURAN

*A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Editor-in-Chief

Caner K. Dagli   Maria Massi Dakake   Joseph E. B. Lumbard

General Editors

Mohammed Rustom

Assistant Editor



**HarperOne**


*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*



THE STUDY QURAN: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary. Copyright © 2015 by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. All rights reserved. Printed in China. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address HarperCollins Publishers, 195 Broadway, New York, NY 10007.

HarperCollins books may be purchased for educational, business, or sales promotional use. For information please e-mail the Special Markets Department at [SPsales@harpercollins.com](mailto:SPsales@harpercollins.com).

HarperCollins website: <http://www.harpercollins.com>

HarperCollins®, , and HarperOne™ are trademarks of HarperCollins Publishers.

FIRST EDITION

*Designer: Ralph Fowler*

*Copy editor: Ann Moru*

*Proofreaders: Jane Hardick, Karin Mullins, and TK*

*Indexer: TK*

*Executive editor: Mickey Maudlin*

*Executive managing editor: Terri Leonard*

*Production editor: Suzanne Quist and TK*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-0-06-112586-7 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-06-112588-1 (leather)

ISBN 978-0-06-112587-4 (paperback)

15 16 17 18 19 IMAGO 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Abbreviations xi

Arabic Transliteration and Pronunciation xiii

General Introduction, *Seyyed Hossein Nasr* xvii

Approaching *The Study Quran* xxxix

Understanding the Citations in the Commentary xli

Commentator Key xliii

## The Quran: Translation and Commentary

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>1 The Opening, <i>al-Fātiḥah</i>    000</p> <p>2 The Cow, <i>al-Baqarah</i>    000</p> <p>3 The House of ʿImrān, <i>Āl ʿImrān</i>    000</p> <p>4 Women, <i>al-Nisāʾ</i>    000</p> <p>5 The Table Spread, <i>al-Māʿidah</i>    000</p> <p>6 The Cattle, <i>al-Anʿām</i>    000</p> <p>7 The Heights, <i>al-Aʿrāf</i>    000</p> <p>8 The Spoils, <i>al-Anfāl</i>    000</p> <p>9 Repentance, <i>al-Tawbah</i>    000</p> <p>10 Jonah, <i>Yūnus</i>    000</p> <p>11 Hūd, <i>Hūd</i>    000</p> <p>12 Joseph, <i>Yūsuf</i>    000</p> <p>13 The Thunder, <i>al-Raʿd</i>    000</p> <p>14 Abraham, <i>Ibrāhīm</i>    000</p> <p>15 Hījr, <i>al-Hijr</i>    000</p> <p>16 The Bee, <i>al-Naḥl</i>    000</p> <p>17 The Night Journey, <i>al-Isrāʾ</i>    000</p> <p>18 The Cave, <i>al-Kahf</i>    000</p> <p>19 Mary, <i>Maryam</i>    000</p> <p>20 Ṭā Hā, <i>Ṭā Hā</i>    000</p> <p>21 The Prophets, <i>al-Anbiyāʾ</i>    000</p> <p>22 The Pilgrimage, <i>al-Ḥajj</i>    000</p> <p>23 The Believers, <i>al-Muʾminūn</i>    000</p> <p>24 Light, <i>al-Nūr</i>    000</p> <p>25 The Criterion, <i>al-Furqān</i>    000</p> <p>26 The Poets, <i>al-Shuʿarāʾ</i>    000</p> <p>27 The Ants, <i>al-Naml</i>    000</p> <p>28 The Story, <i>al-Qaṣaṣ</i>    000</p> <p>29 The Spider, <i>al-Ankabūt</i>    000</p> <p>30 The Byzantines, <i>al-Rūm</i>    000</p> <p>31 Luqmān, <i>Luqmān</i>    000</p> | <p>32 Prostration, <i>al-Sajdah</i>    000</p> <p>33 The Parties, <i>al-Aḥzāb</i>    000</p> <p>34 Sheba, <i>Sabaʾ</i>    000</p> <p>35 The Originator, <i>Fāṭir</i>    000</p> <p>36 Yā Sīn, <i>Yā Sīn</i>    000</p> <p>37 Those Ranged in Ranks, <i>al-Şāffāt</i>    000</p> <p>38 Şād, <i>Şād</i>    000</p> <p>39 The Throngs, <i>al-Zumar</i>    000</p> <p>40 The Forgiver, <i>Ghāfir</i>    000</p> <p>41 Expounded, <i>Fuṣṣilat</i>    000</p> <p>42 Counsel, <i>al-Shūrā</i>    000</p> <p>43 Gold Ornaments, <i>al-Zukhruf</i>    000</p> <p>44 Smoke, <i>al-Dukhān</i>    000</p> <p>45 Upon Their Knees, <i>al-Jāthiyah</i>    000</p> <p>46 The Sand Dunes, <i>al-Aḥqāf</i>    000</p> <p>47 Muhammad, <i>Muḥammad</i>    000</p> <p>48 Victory, <i>al-Fath</i>    000</p> <p>49 The Private Apartments, <i>al-Ḥujurāt</i>    000</p> <p>50 Qāf, <i>Qāf</i>    000</p> <p>51 The Scatterers, <i>al-Dhāriyāt</i>    000</p> <p>52 The Mount, <i>al-Ṭūr</i>    000</p> <p>53 The Star, <i>al-Najm</i>    000</p> <p>54 The Moon, <i>al-Qamar</i>    000</p> <p>55 The Compassionate, <i>al-Raḥmān</i>    000</p> <p>56 The Event, <i>al-Wāqīʿah</i>    000</p> <p>57 Iron, <i>al-Ḥadīd</i>    000</p> <p>58 She Who Disputes, <i>al-Mujādilah</i>    000</p> <p>59 The Gathering, <i>al-Ḥashr</i>    000</p> |
|--|--|

- 60 She Who Is Examined,  
*al-Mumtahanah* 000
- 61 The Ranks, *al-Ṣaff* 000
- 62 The Congregational Prayer,  
*al-Jumu'ah* 000
- 63 The Hypocrites, *al-Munāfiqūn* 000
- 64 Mutual Dispossession,  
*al-Taghābun* 000
- 65 Divorce, *al-Ṭalāq* 000
- 66 Forbiddance, *al-Taḥrīm* 000
- 67 Dominion, *al-Mulk* 000
- 68 The Pen, *al-Qalam* 000
- 69 The Undeniable Reality,  
*al-Ḥāqqah* 000
- 70 The Ascending Ways, *al-Ma'ārij* 000
- 71 Noah, *Nūḥ* 000
- 72 The Jinn, *al-Jinn* 000
- 73 The Enwrapped One,  
*al-Muzzammil* 000
- 74 The Covered One,  
*al-Muddaththir* 000
- 75 The Resurrection, *al-Qiyāmah* 000
- 76 Man, *al-Insān* 000
- 77 Those Sent Forth, *al-Mursalāt* 000
- 78 The Tiding, *al-Naba'* 000
- 79 The Wresters, *al-Nāzi'āt* 000
- 80 He Frowned, *Abasa* 000
- 81 The Enfolding, *al-Takwīr* 000
- 82 The Cleaving Asunder,  
*al-Infiṭār* 000
- 83 Those Who Defraud,  
*al-Muṭaffifīn* 000
- 84 The Sundering, *al-Inshiqāq* 000
- 85 The Constellations, *al-Burūj* 000
- 86 What Comes by Night,  
*al-Tāriq* 000
- 87 The Most High, *al-A'ālā* 000
- 88 The Overwhelming Event,  
*al-Ghāshiyah* 000
- 89 The Dawn, *al-Fajr* 000
- 90 The Land, *al-Balad* 000
- 91 The Sun, *al-Shams* 000
- 92 The Night, *al-Layl* 000
- 93 The Morning Brightness,  
*al-Duḥā* 000
- 94 Expansion, *al-Sharḥ* 000
- 95 The Fig, *al-Tīn* 000
- 96 The Blood Clot, *al-ʿAlaq* 000
- 97 Power, *al-Qadr* 000
- 98 The Clear Proof, *al-Bayyinah* 000
- 99 The Earthquake, *al-Zalzalah* 000
- 100 The Chargers, *al-ʿAdiyāt* 000
- 101 The Calamity, *al-Qāri'ah* 000
- 102 Vying for Increase, *al-Takāthur* 000
- 103 The Declining Day, *al-ʿAshr* 000
- 104 The Slanderer, *al-Humazah* 000
- 105 The Elephant, *al-Fil* 000
- 106 Quraysh, *Quraysh* 000
- 107 Small Kindnesses, *al-Mā'ūn* 000
- 108 Abundant Good, *al-Kawthar* 000
- 109 The Disbelievers, *al-Kāfirūn* 000
- 110 Help, *al-Naṣr* 000
- 111 The Palm Fiber, *al-Masad* 000
- 112 Sincerity, *al-Ikhlāṣ* 000
- 113 The Daybreak, *al-Falaq* 000
- 114 Mankind, *al-Nās* 000

## ESSAYS

How to Read the Quran, <i>Ingrid Mattson</i>	000
The Quran in Translation, <i>Joseph Lumbard</i>	000
The Islamic View of the Quran, <i>Mohammad Mustafa al-Azami</i>	000
Quranic Arabic: Its Characteristics and Impact on Arabic Language and Literature and the Languages and Literatures of Other Islamic Peoples, <i>Muhammad Abdel Haleem</i>	000
Quranic Commentaries, <i>Walid Saleh</i>	000
Traditions of Esoteric and Sapiential Quranic Commentary, <i>Toby Mayer</i>	000
Scientific Commentary on the Quran, <i>Muzaffar Iqbal</i>	000
The Quran as Source of Islamic Law, <i>Aḥmad Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib</i>	000
The Quran and Schools of Islamic Theology and Philosophy, <i>Muṣṭafā Muḥaqqiq Dāmād</i>	000
The Quran and Sufism, <i>William C. Chittick</i>	000
The Quran and Islamic Art, <i>Jean-Louis Michon</i>	000
The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions, <i>Joseph Lumbard</i>	000
Quranic Ethics, Human Rights, and Society, <i>Maria Massi Dakake</i>	000
Conquest and Conversion, War and Peace in the Quran, <i>Caner K. Dagli</i>	000
Death, Dying, and the Afterlife in the Quran, <i>Hamza Yusuf</i>	000
Essay Author Biographies	000
Appendix A: <i>Ḥadīth</i> Citations	000
Appendix B: Timeline of Events Related to the Quran	000
Appendix C: Commentator Biographies	000
Index	000
Maps	000

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

*Bi'smi'llāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*

**T**he Quran is for Muslims the verbatim Word of God, revealed during the twenty-three-year period of the prophetic mission of the Prophet Muhammad through the agency of the Archangel Gabriel (Jibrīl or Jabraʿīl). The meaning, the language, and every word and letter in the Quran, its sound when recited, and its text written upon various physical surfaces are all considered sacred. The Quran was an oral revelation in Arabic first heard by the Prophet and later written down in the Arabic alphabet in a book consisting of 114 *sūrah*s (chapters) and over 6,200 verses (*āyāt*), arranged according to an order that was also revealed. Considered *the Book* (*al-Kitāb*) by all Muslims, it has many names, such as *al-Furqān* (“the Criterion”) and *al-Hudā* (“the Guide”), but its most commonly used name is *al-Qurʿān*, which means “the Recitation.” In the same way that Christians refer to their sacred scripture as the Holy Bible, Muslims usually refer to theirs as *al-Qurʿān al-Majīd* (“the Glorious Quran”; 50:1; 85:21) or *al-Qurʿān al-Karīm* (“the Noble Quran”; 56:77). Known in English as the Quran (also Koran), it is the central theophany of Islam and the basic source and root of all that is authentically Islamic, from metaphysics, angelology, and cosmology to law and ethics, from the various arts and sciences to social structures, economics, and even political thought.

The Quran is the constant companion of Muslims in the journey of life. Its verses are the first sounds recited into the ear of the newborn child. It is recited during the marriage ceremony, and its verses are usually the last words that a Muslim hears upon the approach of death. In traditional Islamic society, the sound of the recitation of the Quran was ubiquitous, and it determined the space in which men and women lived their daily lives; this is still true to a large extent in many places even today. As for the Quran as a book, it is found in nearly every

Muslim home and is carried or worn in various forms and sizes by men and women for protection as they go about their daily activities. In many parts of the Islamic world it is held up for one to pass under when beginning a journey, and there are still today traditional Islamic cities whose gates contain the *Qur'an*, under which everyone entering or exiting the city passes. The *Qur'an* is an ever present source of blessing or grace (*barakah*) deeply experienced by Muslims as permeating all of life.

Inasmuch as the *Qur'an* is the central, sacred, revealed reality for Muslims, *The Study Qur'an* addresses it as such and does not limit it to a work of merely historical, social, or linguistic interest divorced from its sacred and revealed character. To this end, the focus of *The Study Qur'an* is on the *Qur'an's* reception and interpretation within the Muslim intellectual and spiritual tradition, although this does not mean that Muslims are the only intended audience, since the work is meant to be of use to various scholars, teachers, students, and general readers. It is with this *Book*, whose recitation brings Muslims from Sumatra to Senegal to tears, and not simply with a text important for the study of Semitic philology or the social conditions of first/seventh-century Arabia, that this study deals.

This *Book*, according to Islam, was revealed by Gabriel to the Prophet during the twenty-three years of his prophetic mission on different occasions during night and day, in both Makkah and Madinah, in such a manner that, although the words of the *Qur'an* came out of his mouth, its Author is God. The Prophet was the instrument through which the reality of the *Qur'an*, which existed with God on a level of reality beyond time, in what Muslims call the *Preserved Tablet* (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*; 85:22), was revealed to men and women in this world. That is why revelation itself is often described as “descent” (*tanzīl*), which means that the *Qur'an* was a reality before its revelation or descent to the Prophet and therefore not his own words, as claimed by those who have denied the revealed nature of the *Qur'an* over the ages.

And yet something of the reality of his soul is present in the *Qur'an*, and that is why, when asked about his character, his wife ʿĀʾishah replied, “His character was the *Qur'an*.” Shortly before his departure from the earthly plane, the prophet said in a famous tradition, or *ḥadīth*, “I leave among you something which is very important and should be followed; you will not go astray if you take hold of it after I am gone, one part of it being more important than the other: God’s Book, which is a rope stretched from Heaven to earth, and my close relatives, who belong to my household. These two will not separate from one another till they come down to the pool; so consider how you act regarding them after my departure.”

## The Message of the *Qur'an*

What are the grand themes with which this sacred scripture deals? The *Qur'an* contains above all a doctrine about the nature of reality on all its levels, from Absolute Reality Itself, that is, the One God, to the reality of creation both macrocosmic and microcosmic. It provides the full revelation of Allah, or God, as the supreme Reality Whose Oneness is at the center of the Islamic message. God is One, at once impersonal and personal, transcendent and immanent, majestic and beautiful, beyond all that we can conceive and yet nearer to us than our jugular vein, as the *Qur'an* itself asserts so poetically (50:16).

The *Qur'an* also reveals a galaxy of Divine Names and Qualities, which by virtue of being revealed are sacred and provide the means of not only knowing God, but also of returning to Him. They thus play a central role not only in Islamic metaphysics and theology, but also in the practical and ritual aspects of religious and spiritual life. As the *Qur'an* itself states, *Unto*



*God belong the Most Beautiful Names* (7:180; cf. 17:110; 20:8; 59:24); it then commands the believers to call upon Him through these Names (7:180). Islamic doctrine based upon the Quran distinguishes between the Divine Essence, which is beyond all names, qualities, attributes, and descriptions; His Names, Qualities, and Attributes; and His Acts, which include the creation and sustenance of all the worlds and all creatures within them and the constant operations of His Will in His creation, especially the human order, in which His Love and Mercy as well as Justice and Judgment are ever present.

The testimony of faith in Islam, that is, the first *shahādah*, *lā ilāha illaʾllāh* (“There is no god but God”), a phrase that was revealed in the Quran itself (37:35; 47:19), is not only the supreme statement concerning Divine Unity and Transcendence, but also the means of reintegrating all positive qualities back into the One. The *shahādah* also means that there is ultimately no beauty but the Divine Beauty, no goodness but the Divine Goodness, no power but the Divine Power, and so on. Metaphysically it means that there is ultimately no reality but the Divine Reality.

The Quran also deals fully with the nature of human beings. It teaches us who we are, why we were created here on earth, what our goal in life is, what our responsibilities and rights are, what we need to know about the immortality of the human soul and its posthumous states, and the consequences of how we live in this world for our state of being after death. Although it addresses both men and women in most of its verses, it also deals explicitly in some places with the meaning of the creation of human beings as male and female or in pairs (*zawj*), the sacredness of sexuality, the importance of the family, and the responsibilities of each gender toward the other in marriage. Also treated is the correct relationship between the individual, society, and the rest of God’s creation.

No sacred scripture of which we have knowledge speaks more about the cosmos and the world of nature than does the Quran, where one finds extensive teachings about cosmogenesis, cosmic history, eschatological events marking the end of the cosmic order as it now exists, and the phenomena of nature as revealing Divine Wisdom. In fact, the Quran refers to these phenomena as *āyāt* (“signs,” or symbols), employing the same word that is used for the verses of the Sacred Book. The Quran also speaks of life and its origin and of the relation of all beings, animate as well as inanimate, from animals and plants, to mountains, seas, and stars, to God. In a sense the Quran was revealed to a whole cosmic sector as well as to humanity, and many Muslim sages over the ages have referred to the cosmos itself as a revelation, in fact the primordial revelation. That is why they have so often referred to the cosmos as “the cosmic Quran” (*al-qurʾān al-takwīnī*), the meaning of whose “verses” can only be understood by means of “the written Quran” (*al-qurʾān al-tadwīnī*), that is, the book of the Quran, which is Islam’s sacred scripture.

Of course, as many traditions of the Prophet (*aḥādīth*, sing. *ḥadīth*) have indicated, the Quran possesses an outward meaning (*ẓāhir*) and an inward meaning (*bāṭin*), in fact several inner meanings, the most inward of which is said, according to tradition, to be known only to God. Grasping of the multiple levels of meaning of the Quranic text is essential for learning to “read” the cosmic book and for the full understanding of all of its teachings, including the metaphysics, cosmology, science of the human state, eschatology, and spiritual life of which the Quran speaks.

To return to the central subjects and themes mentioned in the Quran, it is important to emphasize that the Quran is the fundamental source of Islamic Law (*al-Shariʿah*) and that, although historically the Prophet has been called, like Moses, a legislator, in Islam the ultimate legislator is considered to be God Himself, who is often called *al-Shārīʿ*, “the Legislator.”

A few hundred Quranic verses deal in a concrete manner with law, while others deal with principles upon which revealed laws are based. In fact, for Muslims the Islamic *Shari'ah* is the concrete embodiment of the Divine Will as elaborated in the Quran for the followers of Islam; and from the Islamic point of view the scriptures of all divinely revealed religions, each of which possesses its own *shari'ah* (see 5:48), have the same function in those religions. For Muslims, who accept the Quran as the Word of God, therefore, following the Divine Law is basic and foundational for the practice of their religion.

The Quran is also a book of ethics. It provides the criteria for discernment between not only truth and falsehood, beauty and ugliness, but also good and evil. Although it emphasizes that human beings should use their God-given gift of intelligence (*al-'aql*) to discern what is true, beautiful, and good, it also insists that it is necessary to have faith in the revelation that provides the final judgment as to what is true and good and in fact allows human intelligence to be fully operative rather than becoming atrophied by human passions. Moreover, the ethical teachings of the Quran concern both individual ethics, virtues that pertain specifically to individuals, and social ethics, ethical qualities, such as justice and generosity, that are basic for any society that could be called properly Islamic. Furthermore, from a Quranic perspective the rights of the individual and those of society are not in tension or opposition with each other, as they are sometimes perceived to be in modern Western societies.

As the fundamental source of the Islamic religion, the Quran contains teachings, including economic and political ones, that pertain to both individual believers and Islamic society as a whole. It also contains instructions for various individual religious practices and especially rites, whose details were provided by the *sunnah* ("wont") and *ahādīth* (sayings, actions, and tacit approvals) of the Prophet. But the Quran also establishes communal religious practices and institutions that are basic to Islamic society as a whole. The Quran, furthermore, establishes the norms of virtues and ethical qualities such as justice and generosity, which are basic to a properly Islamic society, and also the same and other virtues and qualities that must be cultivated by the individual.

Many are aware that the Quran is concerned with religious life as well as matters related to both individual salvation and the social order, but fewer realize that the Quran is also a guide for the inner spiritual life. Paying attention to the inner meaning of the Quran results in the realization that not only does it contain teachings about creating a just social order and leading a virtuous life that results a return to God after death in a felicitous state; it also provides the means of returning to God here and now while still in this world. The Quran is therefore also a sapiential and spiritual guide for the attainment of the truth, a guide for the attainment of beatitude even in this world.

Another theme that runs throughout many of the *sūrah*s of the Quran is sacred history and narratives that pertain to prophets of old and their peoples. This sacred history confines itself almost completely to the Abrahamic tradition and the Israelite prophets, although some Arab prophets not found in the Bible are also mentioned. The import of this sacred history is meant, however, to be universal, since the Islamic revelation is addressed to all of humanity rather than to a particular people, as is the case with Judaism. For Muslims, the sacred history narrated in the Quran was revealed by God to the Prophet; it is not simply a compilation of reports heard from Jewish or Christian sources. There is in fact a subtle difference between Biblical and Quranic accounts of sacred history. While the Biblical accounts have a more historical nature, Quranic sacred history is more ahistorical and is revealed primarily to teach ethical and spiritual lessons. Quranic sacred history is seen as events within the human soul rather than as just historical events in the world. All human beings possess within their

being, for example, the qualities of Moses and those of Pharaoh, the beauty of Joseph and the conniving of his brothers; this sacred history is a means of teaching Muslims about their own souls as well as about good and evil and the ultimate triumph of good over evil, if one takes recourse in God, seeks His Help, and has confidence in Him throughout the trials of life, as did prophets of old.

Traditional views of religious history are usually concerned with eschatology, and Islam's are no exception in this regard. The Quran looks upon history as a finite reality that begins with God's creation of the present humanity and ends with His bringing human and cosmic history to its eschatological end. The Quranic conception of the march of time is in a sense cyclical: each cycle is marked by the descent of a message from God through a prophet, the gradual forgetting of that message by the particular people to whom it was sent, and usually the occurrence of a Divinely willed calamity, followed by the coming of a new prophet. But these cycles of prophecy are not endless. Rather, the Quran announces that the Prophet of Islam is *the Seal of prophets* (33:40) in the chain of prophecy and that after him will come not another prophet, but eschatological events that mark the end of this world and present-day humanity. The Quran also hints at the possibility after the destruction of this world of a new creation, which is, however, beyond the concerns of present humanity, to which the Quran is addressed (see 14:19, 48; 35:15).

Descriptions of eschatological events related to both individuals and human society as well as to the cosmos are central to the Quranic message. Numerous passages throughout the Sacred Text speak about death, Resurrection, Divine Judgment, Paradise, Hell, and by implication Purgatory as well as human beings' final end. The Quran expresses these eschatological realities in a most powerful, concrete, and at the same time highly symbolic language. The Hereafter is presented in such a manner that it remains a constant reality in the consciousness of Muslims throughout their lives here in this lower world (*al-dunyā*). The delights of Paradise as well as the terrible punishments of Hell are described in such a way as to leave an indelible effect upon the mind and soul of believers, profoundly affecting their actions and thoughts in this world. Moreover, Quranic language is at once concrete and sensuous, to be understood by the simplest believers, and symbolic and metaphysical, to satisfy the needs of sages and saints. The paradisaic delights described in the Quran are not sublimations of earthly delights, as some have claimed; both those that are permissible to Muslims in this life and those, such as wine, that are not are presented as earthly reflections of paradisaic realities.

The Quran is also a book of knowledge, and for Muslims it contains the roots of all authentic knowledge as traditionally understood, not as seen by some modern scientific commentators who seek to identify various verses of the Noble Book with this or that recent scientific theory or discovery. In traditional Islamic civilization, all the Islamic sciences, from jurisprudence to astronomy, from theology to medicine, were considered to have their root in the Quran; in fact, all Islamic thought and art can be viewed as commentaries on it. The fact that the descent of the Quran led not only to the foundation of one of the world's great civilizations, but also to the creation of one of the major scientific, philosophical, and artistic traditions in global history was not accidental. Without the advent of the Quran, there would have been no Islamic sciences as we know them, and we therefore would not have words such as "algebra," "algorithm," and many other scientific terms of Arabic origin in English; nor would there be the *Summas* of St. Thomas Aquinas, at least in their existing form.

Not only was the Quranic message foundational for the development of the Islamic sciences, but it was and remains the essential reality in the creation of the Islamic arts, whose principles derive from the *ḥaqīqah*, or inner truth, of the Quran. The Islamic holy book has

provided over the ages the principles as well as the inspiration for the sacred Islamic arts from calligraphy to architecture. Its teachings have also channeled Muslim artistic creativity in certain directions and provided the social context for the creation of works of Islamic art. The fact that Islamic civilization has produced so much outstanding poetry, but practically no sculpture of consequence, and the fact that calligraphy is so central to Muslim life are directly related to the Quranic message, in both its form and content. Also stemming from the Quran are the determination of what constitutes sacred art, what domains are of significance in the traditional arts, and what the hierarchy of the arts must be in Islamic civilization.

The message of the Quran concerning religion is universal. Even when it speaks of *islām*, it refers not only to the religion revealed through the Prophet of Islam, but to submission to God in general. Therefore, in the Quran Abraham and Jesus are also called *muslim* in the sense of “submitter.” The Quranic message is based on the universality of revelation, and the Sacred Text states explicitly that there are *no* people to whom God has not sent a messenger, as in 16:36: *We indeed sent a messenger unto every community, “Worship God, and shun false deities!”*

This universalist perspective has had the greatest effect upon the relation between Muslims and followers of other religions, both practically and intellectually, throughout Islamic history. It is because of the message of the Quran that before modern times Muslims were the first people to develop what has come to be known as the science of religions, or *Religionswissenschaft*, and to write in a scholarly fashion about other religions, including non-Abrahamic ones, as we see in the *Indica* of Abū Rayhān al-Bīrūnī (d. 442/1048), written a thousand years ago. It is for the same reason that seven centuries ago such Muslim seers and sages as Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī (d. 672/1273) wrote about the inner unity of religions, and somewhat later Sufis in India carried out religious dialogue based on mutual understanding with Hindu authorities and translated sacred texts of Hinduism from Sanskrit to Persian, and some in China created a body of works that can be called “Islamic Neo-Confucian.”

The message of the Quran is at once sapiential and practical, legal and moral, concerned with everyday problems as well as the spiritual and intellectual life. The Sacred Text deals with every aspect of human concern, from the deepest intellectual questions and the most lofty spiritual issues to the mundane matters of ordinary life. It is at once therapeutic and didactic. It is a message of glad tidings (*bishārāh*) and also of warning (*nadhīr*). That is why it calls the prophets, including the Prophet of Islam, both harbingers or bearers of glad tidings (*bashīr*) and warners unto humanity (*nadhīr*). It is a guide for every conceivable aspect of human life, action, and thought and yet also a comfort for the soul of believers. As the central theophany of Islam, a theophany whose every aspect is considered sacred, the Quran is the source of all that is properly speaking Islamic. As the living Word of God, it is the ubiquitous companion of Muslims from the cradle to the grave and provides the spiritual and religious space within which they are born, breathe, live, and die.

## The Language, Structure, and Recitation of the Quran

The Quran was revealed in the Arabic language and refers to itself as an *Arabic Quran* (12:2; 20:113; 39:28; 41:3; 42:7; 43:3). The Quranic revelation in a sense “shattered” the Arabic language and transformed it into the sacred language that it is for Muslims. It created a work whose language is inimitable and considered miraculous, a book that is believed to be untranslatable. The sacred presence and theophanic reality of the Quran as well as the levels of meaning contained in its verses cannot be rendered into another language, even Persian and

other Islamic languages that were themselves deeply influenced by Quranic Arabic. In this context it is essential to remember that in various religions where the revelation is considered by believers to be the directly revealed Word of God, the language in which it was revealed is a sacred language, as is the case of Hebrew in Judaism or Sanskrit in Hinduism; in religions where the founder is considered to be the Word or the Message, the language of the message does not play the same role.

For example, in Christianity Christ himself is considered the Word of God and the Logos, and in a sense the New Testament is the word of the Word of God. For two millennia traditional and Orthodox Christians have conducted the Mass in Greek, Latin, Slavonic, and, in the smaller Eastern churches, Aramaic, Coptic, and even Arabic itself. But for Christianity these languages are liturgical and not sacred. The celebration of the Eucharist is valid according to the traditional churches no matter which accepted liturgical language is used. But in Islam the daily prayers, the central rite that could be said to correspond to the celebration of the Eucharist in Christianity, are not valid if not performed in Arabic, whether the worshipper is Arab or non-Arab. One might say that, just as in the Eucharist worshippers become “attached” to the Word, that is, Christ, by eating the bread and drinking the wine, which are transformed through the rite into his flesh and blood, in Islamic rites worshippers “devour” the Word of God through the enunciation of verses in Quranic Arabic. For Muslims, Quranic Arabic is therefore, in the deepest sense, like bread and wine in the Eucharist or the body of Christ. Both are embodiments of the Word of God and therefore sacred. For Christians or those from a Christian background who wish to understand the full religious and spiritual significance of Quranic Arabic, it is not enough to compare it to Aramaic, which was the language of Christ, or the Latin of the Vulgate. It must be compared to the role of the body of Christ in traditional Christianity.

Arabic was the last Semitic language to enter into the general arena of history compared to other languages in this family such as Hebrew, Coptic, the Babylonian languages, Aramaic, and Syriac. For many philologists, Arabic is considered the closest to what German philologists call *Ursemitisch*, the original and primordial Semitic language. The fact that this language was chosen by God for the Quranic revelation is very much related to the nature of Islam as a reassertion of the primordial religion, where the last and the first revelations are united, where the omega reconfirms the alpha, where the alpha of the prophetic chain manifests itself in the omega point in the vast history of prophecy.

The revelation of the Quran in Arabic lifted this language out of time and created a work that stands above and beyond historical change. Arabic as a human language used for daily discourse of course continued and in fact spread far beyond Arabia, thanks to the Quran itself. This daily language has undergone some changes over the centuries, but even those transformations have been influenced by the immutable presence of the Quran. The language of the Quran has been “dead” to the changes of this world, but has remained most alive as the embodiment of the ever living Word of God. For every generation of Muslims, Arab and non-Arab alike, the Quran as revealed in Arabic has been and remains today an ever living presence beyond the changes of the human condition, immutable and filled with the abiding life of the Spirit and constantly affecting and guiding human life. It speaks directly to Muslims today as it did to the Companions who first heard it from the mouth of the Prophet. It remains the supreme guide of Muslims, no matter in which point of space or moment of time they find themselves in this world.

The Arabic of the Quran is in places didactic and matter-of-fact and in other places allegorical, anagogical, symbolic, and highly poetic. It is true that in some places, such as *Sūrah* 26,



“The Poets,” the Quran castigates poets and that some of the early detractors of the Prophet accused him of being just a poet in a pejorative sense. The reason for such criticisms is that in pre-Islamic Arabia poets were often paid panegyrists and soothsayers with little concern for the truth or for spiritual realities. During the rise of Islam poets were also employed by the Prophet’s opponents to compose verses denigrating him and the religion of Islam. According to many Muslim authorities, the prominence of the linguistic arts in pre-Islamic Arabia was among the reasons that the language of the Quran was chosen by God to be miraculous and that the Quran itself challenges anyone to produce its like (see 2:23; 10:38; 11:13). The eloquence (*balāghah*) of the Quran is in fact considered to be miraculous (*muʿjizah*) and beyond the possibility of imitation by any human being. But if we use the term “poetry” in its universal sense, then the Quran, especially its last part, but also other sections, is a work of the highest poetic quality and power that has never been matched in any work of even the greatest Muslim poets. It has also profoundly influenced the poetry created in various Islamic languages and is, moreover, the direct cause of the privileged position of poetry in Islamic civilization and in everyday Muslim life in many Islamic communities.

The Quran speaks of itself as a *clear Book* (e.g., 12:1; 26:2; 27:1), but this characteristic does not only indicate literal and outward clarity, for there are verses whose clarity becomes known only when levels of meaning beyond the outward are considered. Since God is both *the Outward* (*al-Zāhir*) and *the Inward* (*al-Bāṭin*), as the Quran states (57:3), so does His Word have outward and inward levels of meaning. And since God is the Creator of both the apparent or visible (*al-shahādah*) and the absent or unseen (*al-ghayb*), in His Word the unseen often manifests itself mysteriously in the visible and apparent words and phrases that constitute its recited and heard sounds. Because of the multiple levels of meaning, the language of the Noble book is sometimes literal, sometimes allegorical, sometimes analogical, and yet at other times simultaneously analogical and symbolic. The Quran is like an ocean into which Muslims plunge, but whose depth can never be fully reached. If we remember the original meaning of the Latin verb *comprehendere*, which is “to encompass,” then it can be said that it is the Quran that encompasses or “comprehends” the reader, while the reader can never fully encompass the Quran. The Quran is like a net cast into the world of multiplicity in order to bring us back to the world of Unity, which is infinite. As finite beings, we cannot encompass the Infinite, but we can and should be drawn to and ultimately immersed in It.

One cannot discuss the language of the Quran without saying something about the remarkable mathematical structure that undergirds the Quranic text based on the mathematical symbolism of the letters of the Arabic alphabet. The traditional esoteric Islamic science known as *al-jafī*, whose origin is attributed traditionally to ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, who became the first Shiite Imam and the fourth Sunni Caliph), deals with the numerical values of the letters of the Arabic alphabet and their symbolic significance. It is similar to the science of *gematria*, which, based on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, is significant in Jewish Kabbalah and in those schools of Christian mysticism usually known as Christian Kabbalah. In *The Study Quran* we have not considered commentaries and separate Quranic studies based on *al-jafī*, but it is important to mention here their existence.

The science of *al-jafī* brings out remarkable aspects of the inner teachings of the Quran, including the meaning of the mysterious separated letters (*al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭaʿah*) that appear at the beginning of twenty-nine *sūrah*s, and elucidates many basic doctrines. For example, according to Islamic metaphysics, all beings reflect certain Divine Names and Qualities, but man (*homo* or *insān*), meaning both male and female, is the only being in this world who in his or her full reality as the Universal or Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) is the mirror that reflects

all of the Divine Names. Now, the Name Allāh contains all the Divine Names, and that is why one of the names of the Prophet, as the Universal Man par excellence, was ʿAbd Allāh and not, for example, ʿAbd al-Karīm, ʿabd here meaning the recipient and reflection of any of His Names. According to the science of *al-jafī*, the numerical value of Allāh is 66, and so is the numerical value of *Ādam wa Ḥawwāʾ*, that is, Adam and Eve, who in their androgynous union constitute the state of *insān*. Thus, the science of *al-jafī* helps one to immediately grasp and intuit this profound doctrine concerning the human state in relation to God.

The orthography of the alphabet in which Qurānic Arabic is written also possesses a symbolic significance that is brought out in certain traditional studies of the inner meaning of the Qurān. For example, in Arabic, as in English, the first two letters of the alphabet are *a* and *b*, or *alif* and *bāʾ* in Arabic. In Arabic orthography *alif* is written as a straight vertical line (ا) and *bāʾ* as a horizontal line with a dot under it (ب). Now, *alif* is the first letter of the Divine Name *Allāh*, and *bāʾ* the first letter of the first word of the Qurān, that is, *Biʾsmiʾllāh* (“In the Name of God”), the full text of which is known as the *basmalah*. According to the science of the symbolism of Arabic orthography, the *alif* symbolizes the descent of the Divine Word from the world of Divine Transcendence, and *bāʾ* its reception in the human world and in human language, which is thereby sanctified. The point under the *bāʾ* symbolizes the meeting place of the two letters and therefore constitutes the essence of all the letters of Arabic, hence of the Qurān. In traditional Arabic calligraphy the lines are constituted by the harmonious repetition of the single point or dot.

There is an enigmatic saying attributed to ʿAlī whose meaning can only be understood by having recourse to this science of the symbolic form of the letters of the Arabic alphabet when written in Arabic script. ʿAlī is reported to have said: “The whole of the Qurān is contained in *al-Fātiḥah* (“The Opening”). The whole of *al-Fātiḥah* is contained in *Biʾsmiʾllāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm* (“In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful”) [this formula in Arabic begins with the letter *bāʾ*]. The whole of the *Biʾsmiʾllāh* is contained in the letter *bāʾ*. The whole of the letter *bāʾ* is contained in the dot (*nuqṭah*) underneath the *bāʾ*. And I am that dot.” ʿAlī was alluding here to his inner state of “supreme identity” or “supreme union,” to the full realization of unity (*al-tawḥīd*). This account illustrates the significance of the science of symbolism of the forms of the alphabet used in Qurānic Arabic, a science that needs to be mentioned, even if it has not been considered in the commentary because of the audience for which this study is meant.

Turning to the formal structure of the Qurān, it bears repetition that it is constituted of 114 *sūrah*s, which some translate as “chapters,” starting with *al-Fātiḥah*, “The Opening,” which consists of seven verses (*āyāt*), followed by *al-Baqarah* (“The Cow”), which is the longest *sūrah* of the Qurān. Then the *sūrah*s as a general rule gradually become shorter as one proceeds through the text, although there are exceptions. The last part of the Qurān contains the shortest *sūrah*s, but the last *sūrah* is not the shortest in number of verses or words. It is important to note, for those not familiar with the Qurān, that the *sūrah*s are not ordered chronologically according to when they were revealed. Often parts of a *sūrah* were revealed, followed by parts or the whole of another *sūrah*, and then certain verses belonging to the earlier revealed *sūrah* descended. The order of the *sūrah*s itself is considered a matter of revelation, as the Prophet himself specified the location of verses in *sūrah*s and the order of *sūrah*s in relation to one another as they were revealed to him.

Each *sūrah* has a name, and in some cases more than one. Muslims believe that some of these names were also revealed to the Prophet along with the command concerning which verses belonged to which *sūrah*s, no matter when they were revealed, and the order of the

verses within the *sūrah*s. During the twenty-three-year prophetic career of the Prophet, when the whole of the Quran was revealed, many memorized it, and it was also written down on parchment, shoulder bones of camels, sheepskin, and other surfaces. According to tradition, Zayd ibn Thābit was the scribe, and this text was given to the first Caliph, Abū Bakr, after which it was left with the second Caliph, °Umar, and upon his death it was placed in the custody of his daughter Ḥafṣah, one of the widows of the Prophet. After consultation with those who knew the Sacred Text by heart, a second collection was ordered by °Uthmān, the third Caliph, again under the direction of Zayd ibn Thābit. This text, which is known as the °Uthmānic codex, came to constitute what °Uthmān had scribes copy; copies were sent to the four major cities of the Islamic world of that time, Makkah, Kufa, Basra, and Damascus, and °Uthmān kept one copy for himself. These five texts then became the basis of the written Quran that we have today.

There was some discussion among the Companions concerning the numbering of some of the verses, and traditionally several schools of *ihṣā'*, the Quranic science dealing with the enumeration of the verses, have been recognized. With regard to the recitation of the Quran, there are also variants in the declensions and different traditionally transmitted styles of psalmody. Some morphological variations are traditionally seen as something that testifies to the very polyvalence of the Quranic text. The structure of the Quran is for all practical purposes one and immutable. It has undergone no changes over the ages, and Sunnis, Shiites, and Kharajites all accept the same text as the final revelation of God to humanity.

Shiites and some Sunnis believe that °Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib also wrote down the Quran and therefore that there was a second original written copy of it; we know that °Uthmān also had Zayd ibn Thābit consult with °Alī in assembling the definitive text of the Sacred Book. It is also reported in Sunni sources that other Companions, chief among them °Abd Allāh ibn Mas°ūd, Ubayy ibn Ka°b, and Salīm, had also collected copies of the Quran before the °Uthmānic codex was established. Polemical accounts in some apocryphal sources state that the Quran written down by °Alī possessed certain *sūrah*s that were deleted in the °Uthmanic text, but this view is not accepted by mainstream Shiism or Sunnism, and the Quran used by Shiites today contains the same *sūrah*s and *āyāt* as the Quran found in the Sunni world except for a slight difference in the enumeration of a few verses. There is but a single Quran, with fewer variations of any kind than are found in any other sacred scripture.

In addition to being divided into *sūrah*s and *āyāt*, the Quran was also later divided into thirty parts (*ajzā'*, sing. *juz'*). Each *juz'* is also divided in two, creating sixty *ahṣāb* (sing. *ḥizb*), which are themselves divided into halves and quarters to facilitate reading and memorization. In some parts of the Islamic world, one *ḥizb* will be read, either communally or privately, in the early morning prayer and another in the sunset prayer. The text is also divided into sevenths, known as *manzils*, which allow devotees to complete the recitation of the entire text in one week. Sometimes the thirty *ajzā'* or the seven *manzils* are bound separately, so that one may carry only those volumes one wishes to read while on a journey. During the month of Ramadan, when the Quran was first revealed, it is customary for many devout Muslims to read the Quran more than at other times of the year; some read one *juz'* each day and thus complete the reading of the whole of the Quran during the thirty days of the holy month. When Ramadan is twenty-nine days, they usually recite the last two *ajzā'* on the last day or night of that month.

Recitation of the Quran is an important part of Muslim piety. Many read the Sacred Book from beginning to end not only during Ramadan, but also during other periods of the year. However, most Muslims turn over and over again to certain of the *sūrah*s with which they



have particular affinity. In the same way that many pious Jews and Christians continue to read the Psalms, such *sūrah*s as *Yā Sin* ("Yā Sin," 36), *al-Raḥmān* ("The Compassionate," 55), *al-Wāqīʿah* ("The Event," 56), *al-Mulk* ("Dominion," 67), and many of the shorter *sūrah*s at the end of the *Qurʾān* are recited often and in many cases on a regular basis by numerous Muslims. Besides the recitation of the whole of the *Qurʾān*, which terminates with a joyous celebration known as "sealing the *Qurʾān*" (*khatm al-qurʾān*), ordinary recitation usually involves reading and meditating on a small section at a time (a practice recommended for newcomers to the Noble Book as well).

Of course all practicing Muslims, Arab and non-Arab alike, recite certain parts of the *Qurʾān* in their daily canonical prayers, a ritual recitation that must be in Arabic. But other than during prayers, the *Qurʾān* is often also read in the language of non-Arab believers, whether they are from larger groups who speak Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Malay, Bengali, Swahili, English, French, or Spanish or from smaller groups who speak Yoruba, Fulandé, Somali, Albanian, Bosnian, Tamil, or Malayalam. There is practically no language spoken by Muslims in which a translation of the *Qurʾān* does not exist, and in many cases there are numerous translations. There are, however, a few exceptional cases that should be mentioned. Although the Berbers were among the first non-Arab people to embrace Islam fourteen centuries ago, because of special social and cultural circumstances, a Berber translation of the *Qurʾān* has only recently been made available for the first time. And in China for twelve centuries Chinese Muslims did not want or allow a Chinese translation to be made of the *Qurʾān*; such a translation appeared for the first time only in the nineteenth century. In any case when speaking of the recitation and reading of the *Qurʾān*, it is important to recall the vast number of languages in which it is read and studied, but also the fact that no translation can take the place of the Arabic *Qurʾān* in the ritual and liturgical life of all Muslims, whatever their mother tongue might be.

The recitation of the *Qurʾān* in Arabic is based on certain rules, and there are both an art and a science connected with it. It can be read by individual Muslims silently or recited aloud, but not excessively loud. Moreover, the recitation should not be too fast or too slow. There is an art to the recitation of the *Qurʾān* that must be mastered, and *Qurʾānic* psalmody, when performed according to traditional norms, is considered the highest sonoral art in Islam, at the peak of the hierarchy of Islamic arts. It is, along with *Qurʾānic* calligraphy and sacred architecture, the latter of which creates spaces in which the sound of the *Qurʾān* reverberates, Islamic sacred art par excellence.

Outside of the daily prayers, the experience of the recitation of the *Qurʾān* for most Muslims is passive rather than active; that is, most listen to the recitation rather than recite themselves. That is why those who are professional reciters of the *Qurʾān*, or *qurrāʾ* (sing. *qārī*), play such an important role in Islamic society. There is no part of the Islamic world in which *qurrāʾ* are not present, and most Muslims experience the *Qurʾān* through their voices. This art is so important that, in order to encourage it, international contests are held annually in many parts of the Islamic world, contests in which both male and female *qurrāʾ* participate. And although the Arab country of Egypt has been blessed over the ages with so many remarkable *qurrāʾ*, some of whom are known throughout the Islamic world, sometimes non-Arab *qurrāʾ* win those international contests. Some non-Arab countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia produce a greater number of female *qurrāʾ* than Arab nations.

Many who do not even know the full meaning of the Arabic are trained in the art of recitation. They thus experience the *Qurʾān* as the oral revelation that it in fact is and as it was experienced by some of the Companions who first heard it from the mouth of the Prophet.

Many *qurrā'* know the Quran by heart and recite from memory. Those who have memorized the entire Sacred Text hold the title of *hāfiẓ*, or memorizer of the Quran. The poet whom many, including myself, consider to be the greatest poet of the Persian language, that is, Shams al-Dīn Ḥāfiẓ (d. 793/1391), bore this name because he was a *hāfiẓ* of the Quran. A *hāfiẓ* can be found in a village in the forest of Sumatra or in the desert of the Sahara, not only in Makkah and other major Islamic cities such as Cairo, Isfahan, and Istanbul. Wherever *ḥuffāẓ* (pl. of *hāfiẓ*) are, they recite the Quran in beautiful psalmody and thus transmit the grace, or *barakah*, of the sound of the Sacred Text to those around them. The ubiquitous presence of *ḥuffāẓ* is considered one of the miracles of the Quran, because in a mysterious way it facilitates memorization even by those whose mother tongue is not Arabic. In this vein, the Quran says of itself: *Indeed We have made the Quran easy to remember* (54:17, 22, 32, 40). There is probably no sacred scripture in any religion that is memorized by so many people as is the Quran.

## The Role and Function of the Quran in Muslim Life

Much of what has already been said deals with the reality of the Quran in the life of Muslims, but it is necessary to portray the full range of its importance and its effect on the lives of believers. As the central theophany of the Islamic religion, everything related to the Quran, the verbatim revelation of the Divine Word, is sacred—from the ideas, injunctions, laws, and other aspects of its message; to the physical presence of the Sacred Text, which Muslims read and carry with them or keep in a place of honor in their homes; to the sound of its recitation, which accompanies them throughout their lives. The two testimonies (*shahādatayn*), one bearing witness to the Oneness of God and the other to the prophethood of the Prophet of Islam, both verses from the Quran, are the first words uttered into the ears of a newborn child and in most cases the last words uttered by a Muslim in the last moments of consciousness before death. Between these two moments marking the alpha and omega of earthly human existence, the life of the Muslim is replete with the presence of the Quran. The sound of its recitation is nearly always present in Islamic cities, towns, and even villages, and in an inner manner it determines the qualitative experience of the space in which traditional Muslims live.

Every positive act, from starting a meal, to leaving the house for work, to welcoming a guest to one's house, to starting a letter, a book, or any other task legitimate in the Eyes of God, begins with the formula of consecration (the *basmalah*), that is, "In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful," with which the Quran itself begins; and these events usually end with another Quranic phrase, *al-ḥamduli'LLāh*, that is, "Praise be to God." What has already taken place is mentioned using another Quranic phrase, *mā shā'a'LLāh*, "As God has willed," to reassure the believers that nothing has taken place without His Will; and events that one hopes to occur in the future are referred to with *in shā'a'LLāh*, another verse drawn from the Quran meaning, "If God wills," thus confirming that the future also belongs to God and all events in it are determined by the Divine Will. The Quran is recited on occasions of both joy and sorrow, at weddings and at funerals, in individual circumstances as well as in communal events. It is recited often by individuals during private moments when they are alone with their Creator as well as at the opening of conferences or parliaments, the investiture of political authorities, or even sports events.

It can be said that the substance of the soul of a Muslim, whether male or female, is like a mosaic made up of the imprint of verses of the Quran upon that human substance. Not only are the laws by which Muslims live, the ethical norms that are to be followed in life, the root

of all authentic knowledge, and the principle and spirit of all forms of art that can be called truly Islamic based on the *Qurān*, but the *Qurān* is present in the soul and mind of believers during every moment of life, whether one is engaged in lovemaking, fighting a battle in the middle of war, or busy in economic activity. No matter how much one writes about the role of the *Qurān* in Muslim life, it is impossible to exhaust the subject, for the *Qurān* affects every aspect of a Muslim's existence, from the body, to the psyche and the inner faculties, to the mind, the intellect, and spirit.

The *Qurān*, complemented by the Prophetic wont (*sunnah*), even affects in a subtle manner all aspects of comportment (*adab*), which includes not only thoughts, speech, and actions, but also bodily postures and physical faculties—how traditional Muslims carry themselves while walking or talking, entering the mosque, sitting in an assembly, or greeting others. The *Qurān* also transforms the inner faculties, especially the memory, and affects even the dreams of believers.

As far as memory is concerned, there is no practicing Muslim who does not know some of the *Qurān* by heart. The *Qurān* itself strengthens the memory, and traditional Islamic pedagogy places a great deal of emphasis upon memorization. The traditional education system begins with *Qurānic* schools for the very young, where their memory becomes imprinted with *Qurānic* verses that will serve them the whole of their lives. Later, whether students continue on to higher education or enter the workforce, their memory remains a treasury of *Qurānic* verses from which they continue to draw guidance, protection, and sustenance. Needless to say, this is also true for all those Muslims who have gone on to produce intellectual or artistic works on the highest level. When Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037), the greatest Muslim philosopher-scientist, was writing his *al-Qānūn fi'l-tibb* (*The Canon of Medicine*), which is the single most influential medical work in the history of medicine, his memory was as much filled with *Qurānic* verses, which affected his whole attitude toward knowledge and science, as when he was writing his own *Qurānic* commentaries.

The most outstanding Muslim spiritual poets, such as Ḥallāj, Ibn al-Fāriḍ, Ibn ʿArabī, ʿAṭṭār, Rūmī, and Ḥāfiz, did not compose their great poetic masterpieces by forcing themselves to focus on the verses of the *Qurān*. The *Qurān* was already present in their memory and had transformed their souls, so that during the artistic process of creating their beautiful poetry the *Qurān* was already functioning as the central reality of their creative power. Those familiar with the history of German literature know that Goethe and Rückert were influenced by the *Qurān*. They can surmise how much greater this influence must have been in the literatures of the Islamic peoples themselves.

The same can be said for the Islamic arts and sciences in general. In the field of the arts that affect directly everyday life, the *Qurān* both provided the spirit, the principles, and in many ways the forms of these arts and determined the direction that these arts would take. It is the *Qurān* that made calligraphy, architecture, and *Qurānic* psalmody the central sacred arts of Islam, and it is also the teachings of the *Qurān* that prevented the development in Islam of iconic sacred art, which is so central to Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. It is the *Qurān* that led to the development of the aniconic sacred art of Islam.

In everyday Muslim life, one practical aspect of the *Qurān* is its role in the protection of Muslims. It is said in the *Qurān* that God is its protector, and in turn His Word provides protection for believers. Its message, if heeded, protects Muslim men and women from sin and error, while its physical presence is considered protection from various external dangers. That is why many Muslims carry the *Qurān* or some of its verses on their bodies, why they pass under it when embarking upon a journey, and why in days of old even the armor worn by

soldiers in battle was inscribed with Quranic verses. That is also why the Quran is not only recited, but also physically placed near the head of a dying person as protection for the journey to the Afterlife.

Muslims also turn to the Quran for its therapeutic effect upon illnesses of both body and soul. There is a whole traditional science dealing with the therapeutic power of certain Quranic verses, and countless anecdotal accounts in all Islamic societies maintain the miraculous efficacy of these verses. This aspect of the Quran is also the source of such practices in folk medicine as immersing particular verses of the Quran in water and then drinking it.

Finally, the Quran also plays a role in helping decide future actions. The traditional Quranic art called *al-istikhārah*, which some have translated as “bibliomancy,” though this only captures one dimension of the practice, involves performing voluntary supererogatory prayers and then consulting the Quran for guidance or asking God for other forms of guidance, usually by means of a dream. On important occasions where human intelligence and revealed religious injunctions are not sufficient criteria for deciding to perform or not perform a particular action of consequence, believers often have recourse to *istikhārah*, sometimes carried out by those who possess a gift for this art and other times by themselves. Many people, when they want to marry, first make an *istikhārah* before making their final decision. The same holds true for those who are not certain of, for example, migrating to another place, choosing a particular physician in case of serious illness, changing jobs, or deciding on a course of study and lifelong profession. Some believers overdo this practice by using an *istikhārah* to determine whether they should eat a particular dish for lunch, but this is a distortion of the function of *istikhārah* and is discouraged by most religious authorities. According to a famous dictum, there is no need for *istikhārah* when there is clear *istishārah*, that is, indication based on religious injunctions and/or God-given intelligence.

The Quran, then, is the foundation of Muslim life and of Islamic civilization in all its aspects. It is a sacred reality that accompanies Muslims throughout their lives. It is at once the means of discernment between truth and error, the criterion of judgment of their actions, and their protector and source of grace and comfort. It is both their judge and their friend; it inculcates in the soul both the love and fear of God. For believers the Quran is not an inanimate book, but the living Word of God. Its verses, words, and even letters are living beings that speak to believers and also mysteriously “hear” them. The Sacred Text is the Muslim’s constant companion from the beginning to the end of life and even beyond earthly life on the journey to that Reality from which the Quran descended.

## The Study Quran

The history of the composition of *The Study Quran* began some eight years ago when the publisher HarperSanFrancisco (now HarperOne) approached me and asked me to become the chief editor for a volume that would be called *The Study Quran* and complement *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, which this firm had already published. I was humbled by the enormity of the task and first balked at accepting such a monumental undertaking. But after much soul searching and prayer, I came to the conclusion that this was a responsibility that God was putting on my shoulders, one I could not refuse, especially when I discovered that the project might not be realized if I did not agree.

I therefore accepted with humility on the condition that this would be a *Muslim* effort and that, although the book would be contemporary in language and based on the highest

level of scholarship, it would *not* be determined or guided by assertions presented in studies by Western scholars and orientalist who have studied the *Qurān* profusely as a historical, linguistic, sociological document, or even a text of religious significance, but do not accept it as the Word of God and an authentic revelation. Rather, it would be grounded in the classic Islamic tradition in order to provide readers access to the many ways in which the *Qurān* has been understood and explained by Muslims for over fourteen centuries. I also set the condition that I would have complete freedom in choosing the editors and other collaborators. All my conditions were accepted, and so the project began.

For the reasons mentioned above, I chose only Muslim scholars to collaborate with me in this task. At the same time, I did not want the work to be confined or limited confessionally, ethnically, or geographically. It was to be universal and at the same time traditional, that is, expressing traditional Islamic views and therefore excluding modernistic or fundamentalist interpretations that have appeared in parts of the Islamic world during the past two centuries. I set out to produce a text that reflects how Muslims have understood the *Qurān* during their long history and how those Muslims who remain traditional, which means most of them, do so today.

To this end I chose three editors, all American, all with doctorates in Islamic studies from leading American universities, and all with direct experience of the Islamic world, familiarity with the traditional Islamic sciences, and mastery of classical Arabic. To preserve diversity, I chose two men and one woman, two of whom, Joseph Lumbard and Maria Dakake, are American Muslims of Christian background, and one of whom, Caner Dagli, was born, in America, into a Muslim family of Circassian origin. Later in the project, after the translation had been made and the essays edited, I added an assistant editor, Mohammed Rustom, who was born as a Muslim into a Canadian family of South Asian origin and who has a doctorate in Islamic studies from a major Canadian university.

Since this collaborative effort also required the preservation of the unity of the work, I chose these men and woman from among those who had studied with me in one way or another in years past. There exists, therefore, a unity of intellectual vision, spiritual perspective, and scholarly attitude between us that has made it possible to produce a unified work. This unity in the translation and commentary has come about not because of my coercion, but because of the presence of a common vision among us. We have consulted each other at every turn, and in cases of scholarly disagreement between the editors, I have been the final judge and arbiter. But in fact it is remarkable how harmonious our collaboration has been, which might be surprising to some in this age of individualism.

Even so, it is appropriate to say a few words about the division of responsibility. Each editor had primary responsibility for the translation, research, and composition of commentary for different sections of the *Qurān*. When the first draft of a section of translation or commentary was completed, each editor would consult with the others, who would make comments and suggestions. Then it would come to me, and I would make my final additions and edits. The primary contribution for the translation is as follows, by *sūrah*: Caner Dagli: 2–3, 8–9, 22–28; Maria Dakake: 4–7, 10–12, 14–21; Joseph Lumbard: 1, 13, 29–114. The primary authorship of the commentary, which also includes a great degree of collaboration among all of the editors, is as follows, by *sūrah*: Caner Dagli 2–3, 8–9, 21–28; Maria Dakake: 4–7, 16–19; Joseph Lumbard: 1, 29–114; Mohammed Rustom 10–15, 20.

As for the essays, I drew up the list of the subjects to be treated in consultation with the editors, and then I chose the authors for the essays, again in consultation with them. In making these choices, I wanted to be as global and universal as possible within the framework of

traditional Islamic scholarship. I therefore chose scholars from different schools of Islamic thought and different schools of Islamic Law, Muslims who hailed from diverse parts of the Islamic world as well as those living in the West. Some of these writers are world-famous Muslim authorities; others, young gifted scholars just beginning to make their mark. They include all the way from the great Shaykh of the most important seat of Sunni learning, al-Azhar University, and one of the leading Shiite ayatollahs of Iran to young professors at Western universities. I took the final responsibility for editing the essays, going over translations when it was called for, and translating into English one of the essays that was written originally in Persian.

### *Translation*

The translation of the *Quran* into a Western language has a nearly thousand-year-old history going back to its translation into Latin ordered by Peter the Venerable in the eleventh century. The earliest translation in English appeared in the seventeenth century. Since then numerous translations have appeared in English as well as in other European languages, and in fact the number of translations in English has increased almost exponentially in recent decades. Most of the earlier translations were made by non-Muslims, many in order to refute Islam. In more recent decades, however, many translations have been made by Muslims themselves. Among these many translations, some are more accurate than others, some more eloquent and poetic, but there has never been nor can there ever be a single “official” or perfect translation of the *Quran*, even one approved by Muslim authorities, such as the religious authorities (*‘ulamā’*) of al-Azhar University.

In our translation we have often consulted some of the best-known English translations such as those of Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Pickthall, Muhammad Asad, A. J. Arberry, *‘Alī Qulī Qarā’ī*, and Muhammad Abdel Haleem, but our rendition is based on the Arabic text itself and not on any previous translation. Furthermore, we have sought to be extremely vigilant in translating the *Quranic* Arabic itself and not later interpretations of the Arabic. And the fact that ours was a collaborative effort by several scholars has helped us to eschew the personal predilections that can often influence the translation process.

Our aim in the translation has been, first of all, to be as accurate and consistent as we could within the possibilities of the English language and with full consideration of the different “fields of meaning” that many words, both Arabic and English, possess, fields that often partially overlap, but are not completely equivalent. In fact, a huge effort and many countless hours have been expended to ensure that the translation is internally consistent in matters of both style and content. This effort included the creation of hundreds of secondary indexing documents and an enormous spreadsheet to track the use of individual words, phrases, and roots appearing in the translation. Considering the nature of the sacred language of the *Quran*, we have sought to make use of the full possibilities of the English language without the pretext of wanting to be so up-to-date in word usage that our rendition would soon become out-of-date.

We have also sought to be as eloquent as possible, in an effort to reflect something of the inimitable eloquence of *Quranic* Arabic, which Muslims consider a miracle that no human being can ever duplicate. We have sought to produce the best translation possible, and only God knows to what extent we have succeeded.

Since we had the opportunity to explain in the commentary unfamiliar idioms or turns of phrase in the *Quranic* text as well as to expand upon the broader ranges of meaning that are alluded to in its verses, we could provide more literal translations in many instances. Moreover,



literal translation of certain Quranic verses or phrases is often necessary to make sense of the traditional commentaries on these verses, many of which offer substantial spiritual interpretations based upon philological or grammatical analyses of the verses. A literal style of translation is also especially important when trying to represent adequately the complex intertextuality that is a hallmark of the Quranic style.

### *Commentary*

Numerous commentaries have been written on the Quran over the ages not only in Arabic, but also in many other languages. Among the traditional commentaries some have been primarily grammatical and linguistic, and some historical, mostly in the sense of sacred history. Others have been legal, theological, philosophical, cosmological, scientific, metaphysical, esoteric, or mystical, and some several of these at once. In a sense the whole of the Islamic intellectual tradition is a commentary upon the Quran. Moreover, the *sīrah* literature (works dealing with the life of the Prophet), his *Sunnah* (or wont), and the *Ḥadīth* (traditions) are the first commentaries upon the Quran. Even the great works of Islamic architecture from the Dome of the Rock to the Taj Mahal may be said to be commentaries upon the Quran in stone. And lest one forget, the greatest mystical poem produced in Islamic civilization, the *Mathnawī* of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, has been called “the Quran in the Pahlavi [i.e. Persian] language.”

We have benefitted in the composition of our commentary from all these sources as well as of course from works known specifically as *tafsīr*, or commentary, upon many of which we have based our commentary without attempting to be exhaustive. We selected the most authoritative and widely read and accepted traditional commentaries as well as specialized commentaries that offered important information not always available in those commentaries that are more widely read; all of these are listed in the “Commentator Key.” When necessary we also drew from the *sīrah* literature and from Sunni and Shiite *Ḥadīth* literature.

As far as our own commentary is concerned, it is not meant to be nor can it be exhaustive in a work confined to a single volume. After all, there are well-known commentaries in Arabic, Persian, and other Islamic languages that extend to numerous hefty tomes, some running to twenty or thirty volumes, and even they are not exhaustive. Our commentary is meant to take readers beyond the literal meaning of the text when necessary, to clarify difficult passages, to reveal the inner meanings of verses when called for, and to provide a reasonable account of the diversity of views and interpretations in matters of law, theology, spirituality, and sacred history put forth by various traditional Islamic authorities. Our hope is that this exposition will enable readers to interact on various levels with the Quran and remove the erroneous view, held in some non-Muslim quarters, that because Muslims consider the Quran to be the Word of God, they do not think about it or interact intellectually with it, whereas the Quran itself invites its readers to meditate upon and think about its teachings.

Our commentary, while based on the traditional commentaries, is not simply a collage of selections drawn from these books, but a new work. Our text has required making choices about both inclusion and exclusion of earlier texts in addition to providing in some places our own commentary, which is not found, at least in the same way, in the earlier sources.

Ours is therefore a new commentary that is nonetheless based completely on traditional Islamic thought and the earlier commentary traditions. We, and not earlier commentators, are therefore fully responsible for its content, which nevertheless contains numerous citations from the earlier traditional commentaries that we have consulted. These citations are not exhaustive; rather, they provide references for those who wish to pursue these citations further.

In all instances we have sought to make the source and origin of our commentary transparent and to make clear when it is we who are expressing our voice. Traditional commentators often given multiple conflicting opinions regarding particular verses. It should therefore be noted that when a particular traditional commentary conveys an interpretation, this does not mean that the commentator subscribed to that particular interpretation, only that this interpretation was mentioned in the commentary on that verse. For guidance regarding our citation methodology, see “Understanding the Citations in the Commentary.”

The sheer size of the commentary literature has forced us to exclude some materials that might be of interest to certain readers concerned with some particular issue. Moreover, we have tended to omit from the commentary purely conjectural and fanciful interpretations or legendary and folkloric accounts, particularly if they are not widely attested in the traditional sources or offer little in the way of a meaningful interpretation. In cases where such material has been included, we have tried to be clear about our assessment of its questionable origin or authority and the extent to which it is consistent or inconsistent with other passages of the *Qur'an* or with ideas found in the *Hadith*.

Although we have relied heavily upon traditional sources, which are the mainstay of our translation and commentary, we have also consulted reliable sources based on both previous and recent academic scholarship in *Qur'anic* studies. We have, moreover, carried out this task with constant awareness of the biases and fashions present in both historical and contemporary writings about the *Qur'an*. We have been fully aware that many of these resources suffer, from the Islamic point of view, from the fact that they do not accept the *Qur'an* as revelation, they have a truncated view of the Islamic intellectual tradition, or they reject the Islamic worldview as a whole. In some extreme cases, such sources are based on either thinly veiled or sometimes outright hostility toward Islam and are often grounded in very questionable theories and published for the sake of worldly ends, such as gaining fame or furthering academic careers.

Coming back to traditional commentaries, it is important to mention for those not familiar with them that technically *tafsīr* refers to a commentary on a part or whole text of the *Qur'an* organized according to the order of the *Qur'anic* verses and written to clarify and bring out its range of meaning and implications. As already mentioned, in a sense all works on law, theology, metaphysics, cosmology, the sciences, spirituality, esoterism, mysticism, and other forms of knowledge developed in the Islamic intellectual tradition are also commentaries upon the *Qur'an*, but are not, strictly speaking, included according to the Islamic division of the sciences in the *tafsīr* category. In our commentary we have made use primarily of *tafsīrs*, but also when necessary works from the second category.

The traditional commentators were usually men of great erudition, with profound knowledge not only of the *Qur'an*, but also of the different Islamic religious and intellectual disciplines. Their works therefore usually provide a vivid picture of the lively Islamic intellectual scene of their time. They often cite opposing opinions and views concerning various theological, ethical, or legal issues, but treat their opponents with confidence in their own position and usually with the courtesy and respect that is characteristic of disputations in the Islamic intellectual tradition as a whole. One needs only to thumb through the *tafsīr* of al-Rāzī or of al-Qurṭubī to see the lively intellectual ambience in which they flourished and the courteous tone of their disputations. Even a cursory study of these *tafsīrs* should dispel the notion that Muslims had or have a rigid and indiscriminate understanding of the text of the *Qur'an*. To the extent possible, we have sought to preserve these characteristics in our commentary.



## *Essays*

Since this work is meant to be an aid in the study of the *Qurān*, we have included a large number of essays at the suggestion of the publisher to deal separately with various major themes contained in the *Qurān*. Because of the space allotted to us, again we could not be exhaustive. During Islamic history thousands upon thousands of works have been written on aspects of the *Qurān* by Muslim scholars, from the language, grammar, and recitation of the Sacred Text to its metaphysical meaning, from the history of the compilation of the *Qurānic* text to the sacred history contained in it, from *Qurānic* legal injunctions to the most esoteric meaning of some of its verses. Traditional *Qurānic* studies include numerous *Qurānic* sciences, not all of which we have been able to include as separate subjects in the essays.

We therefore had to select what we consider the most central issues for the contemporary audience. As already mentioned, the choice of the topics for the essays has primarily been mine, just as the choice of content has been up to the individual essay authors, but I always made the topic choices in consultation with the other editors; and of course other determining factors included the availability of scholars and their willingness to collaborate with us in this project. In any case utmost care has been taken in the choice of both the topics of the essays and their authors. The essays are in a sense a separate book within this book and can be read either as a supplement to our translation and commentary or as an independent work on *Qurānic* studies written by some of the most competent Muslim scholars of today.

## *Audience*

The commentary we have provided has been composed with the aim of creating a work that is accessible to the general English-reading public, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, and that can also be of use to scholars and serious students of the *Qurān*, again Muslim or otherwise. No previous knowledge of Arabic or the technical vocabulary of the *Qurān* is necessary in order to understand our commentary, although we have included transliterations of Arabic terms whenever we deemed them valuable for those who have some knowledge of Arabic.

*The Study Qurān* is meant to be a resource both for those who wish to study the *Qurān* in its entirety and for those who are interested in a particular subject or topic. We have provided indexes and internal citations and designed the work with red *sūrah* and verse numberings in the header, the translation, and the commentary in order to facilitate easy navigation and enable readers to reference quickly what they are seeking. Reading the translation does not require reading the accompanying commentary or the essays, which, as already mentioned, constitute a supplementary and independent section.

## *How to Read The Study Qurān*

As mentioned above, for Muslims the *Qurān* is the Word of God; it is sacred scripture, not a work of “literature,” a manual of law, or a text of theology, philosophy, or history, although it is of incomparable literary quality, contains many injunctions about Sacred Law, is replete with verses of metaphysical, theological, and philosophical significance, and contains many accounts of sacred history. The unique structure of the *Qurān* and the flow of its content constitute a particular challenge to most modern readers. For traditional Muslims the *Qurān* is not a typical “read” or a manual to be studied. For most of them, the most fruitful way of interacting with the *Qurān* is not to sit down and read the Sacred Text from cover to cover

(although there are exceptions, such as completing the whole text during Ramadan). It is, rather, to recite a section with full awareness of it as the Word of God and to meditate upon it as one whose soul is being directly addressed, as the Prophet's soul was addressed during its revelation. Newcomers to Islam's sacred scripture may, however, wish to read the whole text at least once initially, but then subsequent study should take the form of returning to sections of it in the manner just mentioned.

In this context it must be remembered that the *Qur'an* itself speaks constantly of the Origin and the Return, of all things coming from God and returning to Him, who Himself has no origin or end. As the Word of God, the *Qur'an* also seems to have no beginning and no end. Certain turns of phrase and teachings about the Divine Reality, the human condition, the life of this world, and the Hereafter are often repeated, but they are not mere repetitions. Rather, each iteration of a particular word, phrase, or verse opens the door of a hidden passage to other parts of the *Qur'an*. Each coda is always a prelude to an as yet undiscovered truth. These characteristics of the Sacred Text must be remembered in reading *The Study Qur'an* in order to draw greater benefit from the encounter with it.

As for the commentary, many *Qur'anic* passages are cited in it, because these citations play a major role in understanding the manner in which particular *Qur'anic* passages are related to and elucidate one another. These citations often include passages from other parts of the *Qur'an* whose very citation clarifies the meaning of a particular word, phrase, or verse under consideration. The use of this method is itself traditional, and many commentators over the ages have composed works based on commenting upon the *Qur'an* through the use of the *Qur'anic* text itself. In contrast to the Bible, which is more like a library than a book with a single voice, the *Qur'an* has a single voice, the voice of God as spoken to a single prophet, and in a sense is itself a commentary upon itself. This characteristic of the *Qur'an* was evident to the traditional commentators, who usually had remarkable mastery of the whole text, but it is not known to most contemporary readers, and we have therefore found it necessary to bring it out in our commentary.

Technical *Qur'anic* terms can be found in the index with references to the *Qur'anic* text and the commentary passages where the terms in question are discussed. Often a turn of phrase or the relation between a family of concepts is best brought out by pointing to similar *Qur'anic* passages, so we have therefore provided them in our commentary. Moreover, the multiple levels of meaning of *Qur'anic* passages are usually brought out by citing other passages. Although each word and even letter of the *Qur'an* is like a living being unto itself, on another level it can be said that each part exists in relation to other parts and together they function as a light that illuminates an object in such a way that we can see it from many different angles.

To try to provide a translation and commentary of the *Qur'an* in English authentically poses major challenges that readers of *The Study Qur'an* need to be aware of. When one reads the King James Version of the Bible, one is not only reading an expression of the English language, but also a text that has itself been a major factor in the formation of modern English as far as symbols, metaphors, proverbs, turns of phrase, and certain styles are concerned, not to mention religious ideas and their formulations. This situation also holds true for such Islamic languages as Persian and Turkish, which themselves already contain many *Qur'anic* words, phrases, and ideas. Such of course is not as yet the case for English as far as the *Qur'an* is concerned. The composition of *The Study Qur'an* in English therefore posed for us a much greater challenge than if we had produced this work in Persian or Turkish, into the fabric of whose language the *Qur'an* is already woven. One of the goals of *The Study Qur'an* is to help close this gap and to take a step toward transforming English into "an Islamic language," of course

not in an exclusive manner, but like Bengali, which is both a Hindu and an Islamic language. Readers of *The Study Quran* should view the language that we have used in this light. It is meant to both reach the modern audience and convey the timeless nature of the text.

### *Various Stylistic and Technical Points*

In dealing with the commentary tradition, it is not always easy to separate glosses that explain the language of the text from those that explain its meaning. This difference is not always clear in traditional *tafsīrs*. In our commentary, therefore, we have endeavored to render the Arabic without importing a particular interpretation of its meaning into the text, that is, insisting that a word or phrase that is allusive in its meaning and full of different implications in Arabic be made explicit and unequivocal in English. As for alternative orthography and pronunciation of words in Arabic, they are discussed in the commentary in those cases where some significant differences of opinion or interpretation are at stake. The commonly accepted “readings” and “recitations” (*qirāʾah*) are thus not foregrounded in our commentary, although they inform it. They are, however, discussed in the essay “The Islamic View of the Quran.”

Quranic Arabic does not use the punctuation marks that exist in English except for the one that corresponds to the period. In fact, it has been said quite rightly that the whole of a traditional book in classical Arabic is in a sense one long sentence. But the structure of the Arabic sentences implies what would correspond to commas, semicolons, colons, and so forth in English. In both our translation and commentary we have made full use of punctuation marks according to the rules of the English language, while seeking to be as faithful as possible to the flow of the original Arabic.

Also there is no capitalization in Arabic, and again in this case we have remained faithful to the rules of English in capitalizing all proper names. Moreover, not only all the Names of God, but also all pronouns pertaining to Him as well as all His Qualities, Attributes, and direct Acts have been capitalized. In the latter case we have sought to distinguish between His direct and universal Attributes and Acts, which are always capitalized, and those that concern a delimited and particular manifestation of these Attributes and Acts in the created order. A particularly difficult case in this category is the word “sign,” or *āyah*, which strictly speaking should sometimes be capitalized and sometimes not. But to preserve consistency and avoid any confusion for readers we decided to lowercase “sign” in all instances.

### *Design*

As the art of Quranic calligraphy and later illumination developed, texts of the Quran became often also works of art. In fact, some texts of the Quran, such as a number of Mamlūk, Īl-Khānid, Tīmūrid, and Maghribī Qurans, using different styles of calligraphy, are among the greatest works of sacred art created in any civilization and are recognized by experts as such. Of course because *The Study Quran* is in English, it cannot in any way reflect this art in the whole text, but we have sought to incorporate as much of this art as possible in this book. The *basmalah* was calligraphed especially for this book by the greatest living American master of Arabic calligraphy, Mohamed Zakariya. Our custom numbering medallions, created by Caner Dagli for this volume, have an eight-sided stylized flower design that is typical of many such medallions in traditional Quranic manuscripts and some printed versions and were designed to suit the Latin letters of the typeface carefully chosen for the English text.

The layout of the text itself, which was conceived and supervised by Caner Dagli, reflects to the extent possible traditional presentations of the *Qurān*. In the oldest manuscripts the text is often a continuous block in which the verses are separated by a small above-line or online symbol, which is often something as simple as a triangle consisting of three dots. During later centuries these markers appeared in a great variety of forms, from a simple flower shape with petals to elaborate medallions, each of which was itself a work of art. There also developed the practice of writing the number of a verse beside the verse usually by creating a medallion with the number inside it, so that each verse became clearly delineated. Almost all *Qurāns* printed today follow this practice, and so have we in *The Study Qurān*. One important difference is that we have placed the verse number notation *before* the corresponding verse, whereas in Arabic copies of the *Qurān* the verse number appears at the end of the verse. All these features, combined with the two-color design, have been used both to provide a text where the *sūrah*s and verses are clearly delineated and to re-create to the extent possible a work that reflects something of the artistic beauty of traditional *Qurāns*.

## A Final Prayer

Usually the *Qurān* that Muslims read in Arabic or other Islamic languages concludes with a prayer, composed by a traditional authority, the calligrapher, or the commentator, usually possessing great literary quality. We wanted to continue this traditional practice to the extent of our ability, and therefore as the chief editor of this work I conclude the general introduction with a prayer offered by not only myself, but all the editors:

O Author of the book of existence and of the Divine Word that is the *Qurān*, we thank Thee for having given us the opportunity to live day and night for all these years with Thy Word and to be transformed by this indescribable experience. Whatever we have been able to achieve is the result of Thy Succor, and for whatever imperfection exists in our work we take full responsibility, asking Thy Forgiveness before the Throne of Thy Mercy. Absolute Perfection belongs to Thee and to Thy revealed Word alone, and no translation or commentary on Thy Word by human beings can share in a Quality that is Thine alone. Nevertheless, we pray that our efforts may be acceptable in Thy sight and that this work may become a guide for those who wish to navigate upon the ocean of Thy Word, which, although in human language, opens inwardly unto the infinite expanses of Thy Reality. Thou art the First and the Last, the Outward and the Inward. Amen.

And God knows best  
*wa'LLāh" a'lam" bi'l-ṣawāb*

—Seyyed Hossein Nasr  
 Ramaḍān and Shawwāl 1433  
 August and September 2012

## UNDERSTANDING THE CITATIONS IN THE COMMENTARY

### Passages from the Quran

When a passage from this translation of the Quran is quoted in the commentary, it appears in *italics*. For example, in the following sentence from the commentary on 3:18, the italicized words come from the translation of 3:18:

*Upholding justice* is thought by most to refer to *God* or *He*, but grammatically it could refer to the *angels* and *possessors of knowledge* as well.

Longer Quranic quotations in the commentary are italicized as well. Alternate translations or variant readings appear in standard quotation marks. Thus, all italicized words in English in the commentary are words or passages from this translation. Transliterated Arabic words, such as *ḥadīth* and *tafsīr*, also appear in italics.

Unless otherwise identified, all references in the form of two numbers separated by a colon denote Quranic passages. For example, 12:34 refers the 34th verse (or *āyah*) of the 12th chapter (or *sūrah*) of the Quran. The numbering of the verses matches that of the standard Egyptian edition, which is found in other widely distributed editions such as the *Muṣḥaf al-Madīnah*. Other translations, such as those of Yusuf Ali and Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, number verses somewhat differently in a few cases. This difference exists because traditionally scholars, while agreeing on the text, have disagreed about where some verses end and others begin. The most famous example of this is in the *Fātiḥah*, the first *sūrah* of the Quran. According to some scholars, its first verse is *In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*, while others say it begins with *Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds*.

## References to the Sayings of the Prophet

Rather than appearing in the commentary text, full citations for the sayings of the Prophet (sing. *ḥadīth*, pl. *aḥādīth*) are located in Appendix A, in the sequence they appear in the commentary. Sayings of the Prophet are cited in the text using standard quotation marks.

## References to the Traditional Commentators on the Quran

Throughout the commentary, capital letters in parentheses follow immediately after various opinions or interpretations. These letters correspond to the commentators listed in the “Commentator Key,” whose biographies are provided in Appendix C. For example, when one reads in the commentary on 12:34 the phrase, “Some interpret *x* to mean *y* (T),” this means that the opinion is to be found mentioned in al-Ṭabarī’s commentary on 12:34. This does not mean that it is al-Ṭabarī’s personal opinion, only that the argument or interpretation can be found discussed or recorded by al-Ṭabarī, whether he accepts or rejects it. By extension “(R, Q, T)” means that some interpretations can be found in multiple sources. These citations are not meant to be exhaustive; very often a given opinion will be found in dozens of commentaries, though only one is cited. We have generally preferred to mention those that are the most widely available and universally recognized.

Other times the individual opinions of these commentators are cited, as are those of other Islamic scholars such as al-Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111). For example, “According to al-Rāzī ...” signifies the personal opinion of al-Rāzī, not only an opinion that he records in his commentary from his contemporaries or earlier sources. Opinions other than al-Rāzī’s own but discussed by him would be cited using “(R).”

Full scholarly citations of all the interpretations and opinions in this commentary would have been impractical for a work of this kind. However, writing a commentary without any citations, although it would have saved space and smoothed the style, would have severed a crucial and fruitful connection to the tradition and left our commentary unmoored and ambiguous in its sourcing. Since the traditional commentaries are also histories of the intellectual activity of interpreting the Quran, and since they are arranged verse by verse in sequence like the present work, citing them in the commentary maintains transparency without weighing down the text with innumerable book titles and page numbers. All of the commentaries we cite exist in print and are also available from various dependable online resources, such as [altafsir.org](http://altafsir.org).

These citations serve several functions. First, they make clear which elements in the commentary come directly from the traditional commentaries and which parts constitute analysis and contributions by the editors. Second, they provide a research tool for further scholarly investigation. Third, since the traditional commentaries are slowly becoming available in English, these citations will allow English readers easier access to the traditional scholarship on the Quran.

## Cross-References

Cross-references in the commentary text use a lowercase *c* appended to a verse number to indicate a cross-reference to another portion of the commentary. For example, “See also 24:35c” means “See also the commentary on 24:35.”

## COMMENTATOR KEY

- AF Abu'l-Futūḥ Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī al-Rāzī (d. 525/1131), *Rawḥ al-jinān wa rūḥ al-janān*
- Aj Aḥmad ibn ʿAjībah (d. 1224/1809), *al-Baḥr al-madīd fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-majīd*
- Āl Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1854), *Rūḥ al-maʿānī fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm waʾl-sabʿ al-mathānī*
- Ās Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn ʿĀshūr (d. 1393/1973), *al-Taḥrīr waʾl-tanwīr*
- Bḍ ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿUmar ibn Muḥammad al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286), *Anwār al-tanzīl wa asrār al-taʾwīl*
- Bg Al-Ḥusayn ibn al-Farrāʾ al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122), *Maʿālim al-tanzīl*
- Bq Burhān al-Dīn Abu'l-Ḥasan Ibrāhīm al-Biqāʿī (d. 885/1480), *Naẓm al-durar fī tanāsūb al-āyāt waʾl-suwar*
- IA Qāḍī Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 543/1148), *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*
- IḤ Ismāʿīl Ḥaqqī al-Burūsawī (d. 1137/1725), *Rūḥ al-bayān*
- IJ Abu'l-Faraj ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿAlī ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201), *Zād al-masīr fī ʿilm al-tafsīr*
- IK ʿImād al-Dīn Abu'l-Fidāʾ Ismāʿīl ibn ʿUmar ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*

- Iş Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 502/1108), *Mufradāt alfāz al-Qurʾān*
- IṬ Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq ibn ʿAṭīyyah al-Andalusī (d. 541/1147), *al-Muḥarrar al-wajīz fī tafsīr al-kitāb al-ʿazīz*
- JJ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī (d. 864/1459) and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*
- K ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. 736/1336), *Taʾwīl al-Qurʾān al-karīm*, known by many as *Tafsīr ibn ʿArabī*
- Kā Muḥammad Muḥsin al-Fayḍ al-Kāshānī (d. 1091/1680), *Tafsīr al-ṣāfi*
- KI Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Juzayy al-Kalbī (d. 741/1340), *al-Tashīl li-ʿulūm al-tanzīl*
- M Abū Maṣṣūr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), *Taʾwīlāt ahl al-sunnah*
- MŞ Şadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (Mullā Şadrā; d. 1050/1640), *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-karīm*
- Mu Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 150/767), *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*
- Mw ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), *al-Nukat waʾl-ʿuyūn fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*
- My Rashīd al-Dīn al-Maybudī (d. ca. 520/1126), *Kashf al-asrār wa ʿuddat al-abrār*
- N ʿAbd Allāh ibn Aḥmad al-Nasafī (d. 710/1310), *Madārik al-tanzīl wa ḥaqāʾiq al-taʾwīl*
- Ni Nizām al-Dīn Ḥasan al-Nīsābūrī (or al-Naysābūrī; d. 728/1328), *Tafsīr gharāʾib al-Qurʾān wa ragḥāʾib al-furqān*
- Q Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), *al-Jāmiʿ li-ahkām al-Qurʾān*
- Qb Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1386/1966), *Fī zilāl al-Qurʾān*
- Qm ʿAlī ibn Ibrāhīm al-Qummī (d. 328/939), *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*
- Qu Abuʾl-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt*
- R Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*
- Rb Rūzbihān Baqlī al-Shīrāzī (d. 606/1209), *ʿArāʾis al-bayān fī ḥaqāʾiq al-Qurʾān*
- Sa Naṣr ibn Muḥammad al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983), *Baḥr al-ʿulūm*
- Sh Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī al-Shawkānī (d. 1250–55/1834–39), *Fath al-qadīr*
- ST Sahl ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*



- Su      ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021), *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*
- Sy      Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), *al-Durr al-manthūr fī tafsīr al-maʾthūr*
- Ṭ      Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*
- Ṭb      Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-ṬabāṬabāʾī (d. 1401/1981), *al-Mizān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*
- Th      ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad al-Thaʿālībī (d. 873/1468), *al-Jawāhir al-ḥisān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*
- TH      Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035), *al-Kashf waʾl-bayān ʿan tafsīr al-Qurʾān*
- Ṭs      Abū ʿAlī al-Faḍl ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabrisī (or al-Ṭabarsī; d. 548/1153–54), *Majmaʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*
- Ṭū      Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), *al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*
- W      Abuʾl-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1076), *Asbāb nuzūl al-Qurʾān*
- Z      Abuʾl-Qāsim Maḥmūd ibn ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), *al-Kashshāf ʿan ghawāmiḍ ḥaqāʾiq al-tanzīl wa ʿuyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-taʾwīl*

## Joseph

### *Yūsuf*

**T**he third in the series of six *sūrahs* that open with the letters *alif, lām,* and *rāʾ* and speak of the *Book*, meaning the Quran, *Yūsuf* belongs to the Makkan period (JJ). The *sūrah* is concerned primarily with recounting the entire story of the prophet Joseph (who is also referred to in 6:84 and 40:34) and constitutes the longest and most continuous single narrative in the Quran (vv. 3–101). The general outline of Joseph’s life and times corresponds to Genesis 37:1–46:7, although there are several significant differences between the Quranic and Biblical accounts. The story of Joseph is said to have been revealed to the Prophet when some Jewish scholars in Makkah had persuaded the Makkan idolaters to ask the Prophet about certain details pertaining to Joseph’s life and legacy (R). According to another report, God revealed the story of Joseph to the Prophet after his Companions had asked him to provide them with a story (T).

As the *most beautiful of stories* (v. 3) begins, Joseph discloses a special dream he had to his father, Jacob, who warns Joseph not to convey his dream to his brothers (vv. 4–5), who are exceedingly jealous of him (v. 8). The brothers plot to be rid of Joseph and manage to convince Jacob to allow Joseph to go with them into the wilderness (vv. 9–14). Once left in their care, Joseph is taken into the desert by his brothers and cast into a well (v. 15). Joseph is eventually rescued by a caravan (v. 19) and purchased in Egypt by a high-ranking official (v. 21), identified with the Biblical figure Potiphar (see √12:21–22c).

While Joseph is under Potiphar’s care, Potiphar’s wife, Zulaykhā, falls in love with him and attempts to seduce him, but Joseph does not succumb to her advances (vv. 23–25). After false accusations before Potiphar (v. 25) and widespread rumors throughout Egypt of what had transpired between Joseph and Zulaykhā (v. 29), Joseph is cast into prison (v. 35). Joseph is later exonerated, released from prison, and appointed to high office in Egyptian society (vv. 50–56). By the end of the tale, Joseph’s parents and brothers come to Egypt to stay with him (v. 99), and the dream he had at the beginning of the story is fulfilled (v. 100).

Perhaps more than any other Quranic narrative, the story of Joseph has supplied material for an astonishing array of artistic, literary, and spiritual works in the Islamic tradition. The figure of Joseph himself, who is said to have possessed exceptional physical beauty, is often associated in Islamic literature with Divine Beauty, patience in times of adversity, and the art of dream interpretation. The commentaries on this *sūrah* reflect this rich tradition and incorporate material that is often folkloric and imaginative. The incident between Joseph and Zulaykhā has formed the basis for a variety of mystical and literary romances, one of the most creative of which is a lengthy Persian poem entitled *Joseph and Zulaykhā* (*Yūsuf wa Zulaykhā*) by the famous Sufi poet ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492). The philosopher and founder of the School of Illumination, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191), also uses the motifs and symbols from the story of Joseph in his philosophical treatise *Risālat fi ḥaqīqat al-ʿishq* (“On the Reality of Love”) in order to explain the metaphysical significance of love and its relation to beauty and joy, on the one hand, and sadness and longing, on the other. Many interpret the story of Joseph symbolically and spiritually as an account of the separation of the human soul from its Divine origin and its return to it. At the highest level of interpretation it has often been seen as an exalted love tale that speaks about the relationship between the human lover and the Divine Beloved. As the commentator al-Maybudī says in his *tafsīr*, “How beautiful the story of Joseph is! It is a story of lover and beloved, a report of separation and union. [From it,] the pain-stricken one ought to read of those who are pain-stricken, and the lover ought to receive news of the pain of love and the burning desire of lovers.”

## In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

① Alif. Lām. Rā. These are the signs of the clear Book. ② Truly We sent it down as an Arabic Quran, that haply you may understand. ③ We recount unto thee the most beautiful of stories by Our having revealed unto thee this Quran, though before it thou wert among the heedless. ④ When Joseph said unto his father, “O my father, truly I have seen eleven stars, and the sun and the moon. I

1 The Arabic letters *alif*, *lām*, and *rāʾ*, which also appear in 10:1; 11:1; 13:1; 14:1; and 15:1, are among the separated letters (*al-muqaṭṭaʿāt*) that are found at the beginning of twenty-nine *sūrah*s and whose ultimate meaning, most commentators maintain, is known only to God; see 2:1c. *The clear Book* refers to the Quran (Kl, Q) and its ability to make the truth manifest (Kl; for identical verses, see 26:2; 28:2; see also 43:2; 44:2). Alternately, *the clear Book* could be a reference to the *Preserved Tablet* (see 85:22c; Ṭb). See also 10:1c, where the adjective *wise* is understood to be a reference to the Book's being *clear*.

2 For *Arabic Quran*, see also 20:113; 39:28c; 41:3c; 42:7. Cf. 43:3.

3 In 39:23, the Quran is described as *the most beautiful discourse*, part of which is the story of Joseph, to which reference is made here as *the most beautiful of stories*. This narrative is described this way, because it is understood to bring together all of the truths that pertain to one's religious life as well as one's worldly affairs (Q). On the one hand, it speaks about such matters as the Oneness of God; the nature of prophets, angels, saints, righteous people, evil people, people who have knowledge, and people who are ignorant; dream interpretation; forgiveness; and Divine Love. On the other hand, it speaks about kingship, earthly trials and punishments, human love, travel, business transactions, social etiquette, politics, and human deception (Aj, My, Q). *Beautiful* could refer to the beauty of the story's language and eloquence as well as its content (R). *Thou wert among the heedless* means that the Prophet had no knowledge of this story before the revelation of this *sūrah* (Kl, N, R).

4 Joseph's father was Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham—all of whom were prophets; for the Abrahamic line of prophets, see 6:84c. It is widely accepted that the vision Joseph had was a true dream (Aj, R, Ṭ, Ṭs), which in Islamic tradition is bestowed not only upon prophets, but also upon ordinary human beings. True dreams are distinguished from common dreams in that they convey a truth from another level of reality or represent a manifestation of the spirit in the imaginal world (see also 12:6c). Some commentators observe that the dreams of prophets are a form of Divine Revelation (Ṭ). However, some commentators situate the beginning of Joseph's prophetic mission at a slightly later period (see 12:15c), in which case this vision could be seen as a portent of his impending prophetic function, as was the case with the Prophet Muhammad (see the introduction to *Sūrah* 96).

The *eleven stars* are understood to represent Joseph's eleven brothers (Bg, Q, Ṭ, Ṭs); *the sun* represents his father, and *the moon* his mother (R), or vice versa (Q, Ṭ). The prostration of these heavenly bodies before Joseph is said to have been interpreted by Jacob to mean that a great calamity would soon befall his son (cf. Genesis 37:10), based upon a belief that a created being does not prostrate before another created being, except when the one to whom prostration is made has undergone a severe trial, such as when the angels bowed down before Adam, who was soon thereafter expelled from Paradise (Aj); for the fall of Adam, see 2:35c. Alternately, al-Rāzī interprets the prostration of the heavenly bodies before Joseph as symbolizing Joseph's brothers, father, and mother eventually coming under his care. For the fulfillment of this dream, see 12:100c.

saw them prostrating before me.” ⑤ He said, “O my son! Recount not thy vision to thy brothers, lest they devise some scheme against thee. Surely Satan is a manifest enemy unto man. ⑥ Thus shall thy Lord choose thee, and teach thee the interpretation of events, and complete His Blessing upon thee, and upon the House of Jacob, just as He completed it upon thy forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. Truly thy Lord is Knowing, Wise.” ⑦ Certainly in Joseph and his brothers there are signs for the inquiring. ⑧ [Remember] when they said,

5 Jacob told Joseph not to relate his dream to his brothers because he feared their jealousy of him, as he knew that the dream meant that Joseph would not only experience tribulations, but would also attain an exalted position (Kl). Some say that Jacob understood Joseph’s dream to mean that God had chosen him for prophethood and thus feared that Joseph would suffer on account of his brothers’ jealousy and oppression (Bd). According to one account, because of the innocence of his young age, Joseph did relate his vision to his brothers (Q; see v. 8); cf. Genesis 37:5, 9–10. For Satan as a *manifest enemy*, see, for example, 2:168, 208; 6:142; 7:22.

6 *Thus shall thy Lord choose thee* means that, just as God had chosen Joseph to have such an exalted vision, so too would He choose him to accomplish great tasks (R), which some understand to be a reference to the function of prophethood (Bd, Q). *The interpretation of events* refers to the ability to interpret dreams (see also v. 21). In traditional Islamic psychology, this art entails knowing the source of dreams. True dreams are said come from an angelic source, whereas false dreams come from the lower self or a demonic force (Bd); regarding Joseph’s interpretation of dreams, see vv. 37, 41, 47–49. *The interpretation of events* can also refer to the ability to discern the hidden meanings of scripture (see 3:7c; Bd). More generally, it can refer to the gift of being able to discern the true nature of things.

God’s completing *His Blessing upon Joseph and upon the House of Jacob* (see also 19:6) can refer to the blessing of prophethood (Bd, R), in which case *just as He completed it upon thy forefathers, Abraham and Isaac* refers to their prophethood. Alternately, God’s *Blessing upon Joseph and the House of Jacob* can refer to the combination of

blessings they will receive in this world and the next (Bd). In this case God’s Blessing on the *forefathers Abraham and Isaac* would refer to (1) the fact that Abraham was taken by God as a friend (see 4:125) and saved from the fire into which his people had cast him (see 21:69; 37:97); and (2) the fact that Isaac obeyed Abraham’s request to be his sacrifice and then was ransomed by the replacement of a ram at God’s Command (see the commentary on 37:102–7; Bd).

7 In the account of Joseph and his eleven brothers there are *signs*, meaning lessons (IJ), for those who wish to gain true knowledge and learn the universal import of the story of Joseph (Bd, JJ). One of the moral lessons of this narrative is the ultimate futility of envy, which motivated Joseph’s brothers and led the Prophet Muhammad’s own kin to reject him and cause him harm. Yet both Muhammad and Joseph were assisted by God, and their enemies ended up subdued by their authority (R). The Prophet is reported to have said, “Beware of envy, for it consumes good deeds as fire consumes wood.”

The story of Joseph also contains *signs* for those seeking an answer to their existential situation, counseling them to have patience in times of tribulation, on the one hand, and to have gratitude for God’s blessings, on the other (Qu). Moreover, the story shows many of the ways God gently takes care of His friends through His protection of them. It also contains signs that demonstrate that God’s Love is realized through trial and tribulation (Qu).

8 *His brother* refers to Benjamin, Jacob’s youngest son and Joseph’s only full brother (JJ, Kl, Ts). Since at the beginning of the account Joseph and Benjamin were so young, Jacob was particularly kind toward them and kept them

“Surely Joseph and his brother are more beloved unto our father than are we, though we are a group. Surely our father is in manifest error! ⑨ Slay Joseph, or cast him out to some land, that your father’s concern might be for you. And be, thereafter, a righteous people.” ⑩ One among them said, “Slay not Joseph, but cast him into the depths of the well, that some caravan might pick him up, if you would take some action.” ⑪ They said, “O father! What is with thee that thou dost not trust us with Joseph? Surely we wish him well. ⑫ Send him forth with us tomorrow, to frolic and play. We shall surely be his keepers.” ⑬ He said,

closer to him than he did their brothers, but the other brothers could not bear this distinction and felt envious (Ts). *A group* translates *‘uṣbah*, which conveys the sense of a large group of people usually understood to range from ten to forty in number (Bg, Kl). *Though we are a group* can thus be read as an expression of shock or astonishment, for the brothers thought that, as a larger or more powerful group, they had more right to their father’s love than his two younger children (Bd, Z). In tribal cultures, having many sons to help with work and defense of family and tribe was a reason for valuing them. According to this logic, having many grown sons would thus be more valuable than having two young ones, since the latter would not suffice as defenders of their father or as powerful bearers of his legacy. With respect to Joseph in particular, it is said that Jacob loved him so much that he would keep Joseph with him night and day, never parting company (Aj). Joseph’s brothers initially envied him because Jacob preferred him, but their envy became more intense after they learned of Joseph’s dream (see 12:5c; Ts).

9 The brothers believed that slaying or banishing Joseph *to some land* would remove him from Jacob’s attention and cause Jacob to eventually set his heart on them instead (My), meaning that his *concern* would then be for them alone. *And be, thereafter, a righteous people* means that the brothers intended to repent later to God for their transgression against Joseph (JJ, Z) and to be upright thereafter (Kl), or that, after they had disposed of Joseph, they would seek to mend their relationship with their father (Kl, Z).

10 *One among them* is a reference to their oldest brother (IK), who is not identified in the Quran but whose action resembles that of either Judah or Reuben (cf. Genesis 37:22–28; Bd, IK, Tū). According to the majority of commentators, the suggestion to *cast him into the depths of the well, that some caravan might pick him up* did not meet with the brothers’ approval until later; see 12:15c.

11–12 The brothers’ question is an indication both that Jacob feared what they would do to Joseph (R) and that they had previously asked Jacob to allow Joseph to go with them, but that he had refused their request (Q). If this was the case, then the suggestion to throw Joseph into the well mentioned in v. 10 was one of perhaps several other plans that they had made to dispose of him. By saying, *Surely we wish him well*, the brothers made it appear to Jacob that they had a great deal of love and compassion for Joseph (R), implying they did not intend to harm him. It was the brothers’ custom to go to the pasture and spend some time there in leisure (R). Thus, their request that Jacob allow Joseph to go with them so that he can *frolic and play* was the perfect pretext for the plan they had finally chosen to carry out. The expression *we shall surely be his keepers* is also employed by the brothers in v. 63, where they attempt to convince Jacob that nothing would happen to Benjamin if he were to send him along with them; see v. 64 for Jacob’s response.

13–14 Jacob was saddened by the possibility of being separated from Joseph for even an hour (N) on account of his intense love for him (see 12:8c). From a spiritual perspective, just as Jacob

“Truly it grieves me that you should go with him. And I fear that the wolf may eat him, while you are heedless of him.” <sup>14</sup> They said, “If the wolf should eat him, while we are a group, then we would surely be losers!” <sup>15</sup> So when they went with him, and agreed to put him in the depths of the well, We revealed unto him, “Verily thou wilt inform them of this affair of theirs, when they are

could not be without his beloved for even an hour, so should believers not be forgetful of their Divine Beloved for even a moment, since heedlessness of God is separation, while remembrance of Him is togetherness (Aj).

Some commentators relate an account of a dream that Jacob had in which he was at the top of a mountain and Joseph was in a valley, when suddenly ten wolves encircled Joseph in order to devour him. But one of the wolves left him, at which time the ground was rent asunder and Joseph remained concealed underground for three days. According to this account, the wolves represent the brothers; the one wolf who left Joseph represents Judah or Reuben, who convinced the others not to kill him; and the crack in the ground represents the well into which the brothers resolved to cast Joseph (see v. 10). Thus, by speaking of the *wolf* devouring Joseph, Jacob was referring to the ten brothers (Q), who, like wolves, would act deceptively in devouring their prey. Others, however, say that since wolves were generally the most feared creatures in the pastures, Jacob was referring to an actual wolf (Q), and even a specific wolf, as the definite article *the* in *the wolf* indicates (see also 12:16–17c). The brothers’ response is understood to be an oath or a promise that nothing would happen to Joseph (JJ).

<sup>15</sup> *So when they went with him* implies that the brothers had been given permission by Jacob to take Joseph with them (IJ, IH, R); cf. Genesis 37:13, where it is Jacob who sends Joseph to the brothers. According to one account, when Jacob sent Joseph with his brothers, he took a solemn pledge from them that they would protect him (cf. v. 66). Reuben (in this account) agreed to this, and then Jacob said to him, “O Reuben, he is little. And you know, O my son, my compassion for him. If he is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, quench his thirst. If he is tired, carry him, and then quickly bring him back to me” (Q).

When they *agreed to put him in the depths of the well* refers to both the plan and its implementation (JJ, IH, Q, R). Thus, between the words *they went with him* and *they agreed to put him in the depths of the well* a sequence of events took place that is not mentioned in the Quran, but that accounts for the period between Joseph’s departure with his brothers and his time in the well.

Commentators describe this extra-Quranic sequence of events as follows. When the brothers left with Joseph, they took turns carrying him upon their shoulders, and Jacob saw all of them off. Once they were out of Jacob’s sight, the brother upon whose shoulders Joseph was sitting threw him down on the ground, almost breaking some of his limbs (Q). Joseph then sought his other brothers’ help, but to no avail, since each brother to whom he went took his turn at striking him (R). It is said he was beaten so severely that he was on the brink of death (R, T). One common narrative in the commentaries suggests that the brothers had previously promised Judah or Reuben (the eldest brother in some versions) that they would at least not kill Joseph (see 12:10c). When they were about to kill Joseph, this eldest brother interceded and reminded them of their promise (R, T). It was then that they decided *to put him in the depths of the well*.

According to another account, when Joseph sought one brother’s help as his other brothers were attacking him, this brother was moved to compassion for him and thus interceded with the brothers, telling them to return Joseph to Jacob and not to kill him. Upon hearing this, the other brothers accused the one brother of being opportunistic, only seeking to save Joseph in order to gain status in Jacob’s eyes. They then threatened to kill him along with Joseph if he chose to help him. So this brother convinced them that they should throw Joseph into a well rather than kill him (cf. Genesis 37:26–27, where he convinces the



unaware.” <sup>16</sup> And in the evening they came weeping unto their father. <sup>17</sup> They said, “O father! We went racing with one another, and left Joseph with our things, and the wolf ate him. But thou wouldst not believe us, even if we were

brothers to sell Joseph), since by throwing him into the well Joseph would possibly die, in which case the physical stain of his blood would not be on their hands, or he would eventually be taken off by a caravan, which would at least ensure that he would be taken far away from them.

The brothers took Joseph to the well and tied him up with a rope (IK). It is said that the well was very deep, spacious at the bottom, with a narrow hole at the top (IH). They then began to lower Joseph into the well. When he attempted to cling to one of the brothers as they were lowering him, the brother struck him and insulted him; and when Joseph attempted to save himself by grasping the edge of the well, the brothers hit his hands in order to loosen his grip (IK). The brothers also tied up Joseph’s hands and tore off his shirt. Then Joseph cried out, “My brothers, return the shirt to me—I will cover myself with it in the well!” to which his brothers sarcastically responded, “Call the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars [cf. v. 2] to comfort you!” (T, Ts). When Joseph was half-way down the well, the brothers cut the rope, he fell into the water at the bottom of the well, and the water covered him completely. In order to save himself, Joseph grabbed hold of a rock in the middle of the well and stood up on it (IK).

When Joseph was in the well, God *revealed unto him*, through the medium of an angel or through inspiration (*ilbām*; KI), that he would *inform them of this affair of theirs, when they are unaware*. Some commentators have said that this was the very moment in which Joseph became a prophet (Q, Ts), as he had received a revelation from God. The commentators agree that these words revealed to Joseph were a foretelling of the future. They were intended to give him solace in a difficult situation (JJ) and to strengthen his heart with the firm knowledge that he would eventually be freed from his current state of trial and that his brothers would one day fall under his authority (R).

*When they are unaware* can also be read to mean “while they are unaware,” in which case these words would not be a part of God’s direct address to Joseph about a future event, but

would instead be a reference within the verse to the actual situation in which Joseph found himself in the well (Bd): God was revealing to him something of which his brothers were unaware. Al-Rāzī observes that the wisdom in concealing this revelation from Joseph’s brothers was that, had they known that Joseph was a prophet, their jealousy would have been greater, and they would surely have killed him. Al-Bayḍāwī notes that *when they are unaware* is a foreshadowing of v. 58, where Joseph meets his brothers and recognizes them, but they do not recognize him. This reading accords with the sequence of events that follow v. 58, where Joseph knows the identity of his brothers and eventually informs them of their wrongdoing (see vv. 58–90).

Many commentators also transmit popular folkloric details surrounding the story of Joseph. For example, the water of the well was bitter, but when Joseph went into the well, its water became sweet (My, R); and the well itself, which was previously dark, was now illuminated (My). We are also told that the only thing Joseph was wearing when he was in the well was an amulet (*taʿwīdh*), fastened around his arm, that contained a shirt made from the silk of Paradise. Gabriel had originally brought this shirt to Abraham when he was thrown into the fire by his people (see 21:69; 37:97), who then bequeathed it to his son Isaac, who bequeathed it to his son Jacob. When Joseph was old enough, Jacob tied it around his neck. While Joseph was in the well, Gabriel came to him, opened the amulet, and put the shirt on him (My, R, Ts).

<sup>16–17</sup> When the brothers came in *weeping*, Jacob became worried and asked them if anything had happened to their sheep that were out in the pasture (Bg, Q, T). Commenting on the brothers’ false tears, al-Qushayrī notes that it was their hypocrisy that allowed them to lie in such a blatant manner, saying that when people become total hypocrites, they can control their eyes to the point that they can cry at will. In responding to Jacob’s question, the brothers said that nothing had happened to their sheep, which consequently



truthful.” ⑱ And they brought forth his shirt with false blood. He said, “Nay, your souls have seduced you in this matter. Beautiful patience! And God is the One Whose help is sought against that which you describe.” ⑲ And then a caravan came along, and sent their water carrier, and he let down his bucket. He said, “Good news! Here is a boy!” So they hid him as merchandise. And God knew well what they were doing. ⑳ And they sold him for a low price, a number

led Jacob to ask, “What happened to you then, and where is Joseph?” (Bg). They then put forward their lie: they *went racing with one another* in order to train themselves, so they could combat enemies and the wolf, which had been snatching away their sheep (R); they had left Joseph with their *things*, namely, their garments and clothes (Bg). Upon hearing the news of Joseph’s death, Jacob fainted, and the brothers poured water over him to wake him up. Yet he remained unconscious until early the next morning (Q). The brothers told Jacob that they would be unable to convince him *even if* they were speaking the truth, because they felt Jacob had a bad opinion of them (Bd); cf. Genesis 37:33, where Jacob believes their account. From Jacob’s perspective, he could not believe them, because he was suspicious of them to begin with (R), which is why the brothers themselves asked him in v. 11, *What is with thee that thou dost not trust us with Joseph?* (see 12:11–12c). This mistrust of the brothers foreshadows an incident later in this *sūrah* in which the brothers return to Jacob with some news about which they were actually being truthful, yet he still does not believe them, and they themselves become veiled from the truth of what was happening in large part due to their own actions (see vv. 81–83); see also 12:5c; 12:18c.

18 The brothers had Joseph’s shirt from the moment they had torn it off him before they cast him into the well (see 12:15c); cf. Genesis 37:3, which says that Jacob loved Joseph so much that he made him “a long robe with sleeves” or “a coat of many colors” (KJV). Before returning to Jacob at night, they spattered *false blood* on it, that of either a baby goat or a lamb that the brothers slaughtered for this purpose (IT; cf. Genesis 37:31, where it is the blood of a goat). Jacob’s response indicates that they had convinced themselves that their actions were not grievous (Aj), but that he

did not believe them (Tb). Jacob also asked his sons why the shirt did not evince any signs that a predator had attacked Joseph, since if a wolf had devoured Joseph, his shirt would have been completely torn apart by the wolf (IT, T).

Upon hearing the brothers’ blatant lie and seeing their false evidence, Jacob exclaimed, *Beautiful patience!* which refers to a kind of patience that causes one not to complain to anyone but God; see v. 86. Some interpret it to mean, “[My patience is/will be] a beautiful patience” (T). About this phrase, the Prophet said, “Beautiful patience is that which entails no complaint to God’s creatures” (Bd); see also 70:5c. Thus, *Beautiful patience!* is an expression used at times of extreme grief to find solace in the fact that patience will triumph in the end and that the difficulty will eventually pass. *God is the One Whose help is sought against that which you describe* means that Jacob seeks God’s help in bearing the lie that his sons were telling him concerning Joseph’s death (Aj); for an almost identical statement, see 21:112. Cf. v. 83.

19–20 Tradition records that Joseph had been in the well for three days when a caravan came from Midian on its way to Egypt (IK), a caravan that was lost and had come across the well fortuitously (Bg, My). The people in the caravan alighted near the well and *sent their water carrier* to take water from it. When *he let down his bucket*, Joseph clung to its rope and came out of the well (Bg). They presented Joseph *as merchandise* (T); that is, they said he was being taken as a slave. Joseph complied out of fear that they would kill him if he went against their wishes (JJ). They went on to sell Joseph in Egypt (Bg, IK) for a *low price*, which is understood by some to signify that he was a free person who had been taken unlawfully as a slave (R): *low price* signifies that any

of dirhams, for they valued him not. <sup>21</sup> The man from Egypt who bought him said unto his wife, “Give him honorable accommodation. It may be that he will bring us some benefit, or that we may take him as a son.” And thus did We establish Joseph in the land, that We might teach him the interpretation of events. And God prevails over His affair, but most of mankind know not. <sup>22</sup> When he reached his full maturity, We gave him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We recompense the virtuous. <sup>23</sup> But she in whose house he was staying sought to lure him from himself. She locked the doors and said, “Come, thou!” He said,

price would be “low.” *They valued him not* means they did not place much importance on him, considering him only “scavenged goods,” or that they did not desire to keep him out of fear that Joseph’s rightful owner (as they imagined it) would come and lay claim to him (R).

**21–22** As in the Bible (Genesis 39:1), *the man from Egypt who bought* Joseph is identified by the commentators as Potiphar (Qīṭfir or Iṭfir), referred to in the Quran by the title *al-ʿAzīz*, rendered in this *sūrah* as *viceroys* (a term used for anyone occupying a high-ranking position; see vv. 30, 51, 78, 88; Ṭṣ) and sometimes identified by commentators (as in Genesis 37:36) as the captain of Pharaoh’s guard (Ṭṣ). *ʿAzīz* can also mean “king” (IK, Ṭ), but it also denotes something that is grand, powerful, cherished, or honorable; hence it can refer to a lofty or important position. Since this *sūrah* also speaks of a *king* (vv. 43, 50, 54, 76), *ʿazīz* would denote a powerful official, which is what Potiphar was and what Joseph would become. Other Islamic sources state that Potiphar oversaw the treasury of Egypt (Aj, R, Ṭṣ, Z), which perhaps derives from the fact that when Joseph is later called *al-ʿAzīz*, his role is as keeper of the storehouses of the kingdom (see vv. 78, 88). The name of *his wife* in Islamic sources is sometimes given as Rāʿīl or, more commonly, Zulaykhā (AJ, R, Ṭṣ), although she is not named in the Quran. It is said that Potiphar purchased Joseph in the marketplace (KI), after he had been struck by Joseph’s inner beauty (My). He then instructed Zulaykhā to give Joseph *honorable accommodation*, in other words, to arrange for a beautiful and dignified dwelling place for Joseph in their home (Bḍ, Z).

*It may be that he will bring us some benefit, or that we may take him as a son* are the same words uttered to Pharaoh by his wife in connection with the infant Moses; see 28:9. Potiphar proposed that they might take Joseph as their son, because they did not have children (Ṭṣ) and were unable to have them (JJ, Bḍ). *And thus did We establish Joseph in the land* (*land* meaning Egypt; IK) refers to God’s actions in saving Joseph from death, taking him out of the well, and placing him in the house of Potiphar (cf. Genesis 39:2–6; Bg); see also v. 56. *That We might teach him the interpretation of events* refers to God’s teaching Joseph the interpretation of dreams that foretold events (see vv. 36–37, 41, 43–49; Bg); this gift was the primary means by which he would achieve ascendancy in Egyptian society (see vv. 54–56). *God prevails over His affair* is understood to mean that, although Joseph’s brothers willed for him to remain in the well, God willed to exalt him to a station of proximity to the king (Qu). *Most of mankind know not* occurs two other times in this *sūrah* (vv. 40, 68) and in 7:187; 16:38; 30:6, 30; 34:28, 36; 40:57; 45:26.

*We gave him wisdom*, that is, prophethood or the ability to judge between people with justice (Aj), *and knowledge*, that is, knowledge of dream interpretation and future events or knowledge of the mysteries and the proper etiquette of servanthood toward God (Aj). *Thus do We recompense the virtuous* also appears verbatim in 6:84; see also 5:85; 28:14. *Virtuous* is used in connection with Joseph numerous times in this *sūrah*; see vv. 36, 56, 78, 90; 12:36c.

**23** The Prophet is reported to have said that Joseph was given half of beauty, which has commonly been interpreted to mean that he was given

“God be my refuge! Truly he is my lord, and has made beautiful my accommodation. Verily the wrongdoers will not prosper!” <sup>24</sup> She indeed inclined toward him, and he would have inclined toward her, had he not seen the proof of his Lord. Thus it was, that We might turn him away from evil and indecency. Truly he was among Our sincere servants. <sup>25</sup> And they raced to the door, while she tore his shirt from behind. And they encountered her master at the door. She said, “What is the recompense for one who desires ill toward thy wife, save that

half of the beauty in the world (cf. Genesis 39:7). Potiphar’s wife, Zulaykhā, who was commissioned by her husband to tend to Joseph’s needs while he was a guest in their home, fell in love with him because of his exceptional physical beauty (IK). His beauty was such that it caused her to desire him sexually (R), and she thus *sought to lure him from himself*; that is, to seduce him (IK). Joseph’s objection, *He is my lord, and has made beautiful my accommodation*, can be a reference to Potiphar (Kl, Q, Ṭs), who in v. 21 orders Zulaykhā to give Joseph *honorable accommodation* (N, Z). According to this reading, Joseph’s statement is tantamount to saying, “Potiphar has honored me, and I shall not betray him” (Q; cf. Genesis 39:8–10). Alternately, the reference can be to God (Bg, Kl, Qu); according to this reading, it would mean, “He Most High is my true Master and is the One Who saved me from the well and gave me a great standing in the ‘Azīz’s heart, so that he provided for me an honorable accommodation. Therefore, it is not fitting that I should have the audacity to disobey Him” (Qu).

<sup>24</sup> Most commentators mention that Joseph desired Zulaykhā just as she desired him, but he did not act on his desire; for him it was a passing feeling occurring in his heart, and he did not follow through with it. Instead, he immediately turned to God and dismissed the thought of attraction to her as soon as he had *seen the proof of his Lord* (Kl). Al-Rāzī compares this account to righteous persons who, while fasting during the summer, see rosewater with ice in it; they would naturally be inclined to drink it, but, given their faithful adherence to the religious law, they do not do so.

One widely reported incident explains what is meant by his seeing *the proof of his Lord*.

Zulaykhā, who worshipped idols, had covered an idol in the room. When Joseph asked her why she had done that, she replied by saying that she was ashamed to sin before the idol. Upon hearing this account, Joseph asked how she could be ashamed before an idol, which can neither see nor hear, but was not ashamed before God, Who is Hearing and Seeing (My). This exchange led Joseph to contemplate his own situation before God, and this realization served as his *proof* (My, Q). Alternately, it is said that the *proof* was that the Archangel Gabriel appeared before Joseph (R). *That We might turn him away from evil* refers to keeping him from being disloyal to Potiphar (IJ, JJ) or from having a deep-rooted sexual desire (*shahwah*) for Potiphar’s wife (Q), and *indecency* refers to the illicit sexual act (JJ).

<sup>25</sup> Joseph attempted to flee from Zulaykhā and made for the door; she chased after him (JJ), tearing his shirt from behind in her attempt to prevent him from escaping (Kl; cf. Genesis 39:11–12). When they met Potiphar at the door, Zulaykhā sought to exonerate herself by making it appear as though she was the victim fleeing from Joseph (Bd). Although Zulaykhā was in love with Joseph, her love for him was not yet complete and sincere, for she lied to Potiphar in order to save herself, even though it meant accusing Joseph of an act that he did not commit (My), namely, intending *ill* toward her, which alludes to illicit sexual relations (Āl); for a discussion of the progression of Zulaykhā’s love, see 12:51c. It is also said that with her question to Potiphar, which was actually a suggestion (Āl, Bd), Zulaykhā sought to incite Potiphar’s jealousy and rage in order to take revenge upon Joseph for not complying with her wishes (Aj; cf. Genesis 39:13–19). Some commentators, especially Sufi ones, mention that Zulaykhā’s

he be imprisoned, or a painful punishment?” <sup>26</sup> He said, “It was she who sought to lure me from myself.” And a witness from her own people testified, “If his shirt is torn from the front, then she has spoken the truth and he is among the liars. <sup>27</sup> But if his shirt is torn from behind, then she has lied and he is among the truthful.” <sup>28</sup> So when he saw that his shirt was torn from behind, he said, “Verily this is among the schemes of you women—your scheming is great indeed! <sup>29</sup> Joseph, turn away from this. And you, seek forgiveness for your sin. Truly you were among those at fault.” <sup>30</sup> Some women of the city said, “The viceroy’s wife sought to lure her slave boy from himself! He has filled her with ardent love. Truly we consider her to be in manifest error.” <sup>31</sup> So when she heard of their plotting, she sent for them, and prepared a repast for them, and gave each of them a knife. And she said [to Joseph], “Come out before them!” Then when they saw him, they so admired him that they cut their hands and

love for Joseph was so great that it blinded her to every other consideration.

<sup>26–27</sup> Joseph’s words in his defense mean, “She wanted to commit indecency with me, but I refused and fled” (Bg). *A witness from her own people* refers, according to many traditional sources, to one of Zulaykhā’s paternal cousins who was a wise man (R). If the shirt were torn from the front, it would indicate that Zulaykhā was telling the truth, because it would mean that Zulaykhā struggled to defend herself from Joseph (Kl). That the shirt was torn from the back indicates that Joseph was telling the truth, because it means that Zulaykhā chased Joseph and laid hold of his shirt from the back to keep him from escaping (Kl).

<sup>28</sup> *He in he saw* can refer to Potiphar or to the wise man from Zulaykhā’s family (Q). If it refers to Potiphar, then his statement *Verily this is among the schemes of you women* would be a response to Zulaykhā’s lie to him in v. 25, *What is the recompense for one who desires ill toward thy wife?* (Q).

<sup>29</sup> Here the speaker is understood by some to be the wise man from Zulaykhā’s family (Q). His advice to Joseph to *turn away from this* means that Joseph should not mention this incident to anyone and should conceal its details (Q, Z), lest it

become known to the public (JJ) and presumably form the basis of much speculation and rumor-mongering. The news of this event nevertheless spread, as indicated in v. 30.

<sup>30</sup> As the news of what transpired between Joseph and Zulaykhā spread throughout Egypt, some of the wives of the notables began criticizing and blaming Zulaykhā for her attempt to seduce Joseph (IK). *He has filled her with ardent love* means Zulaykhā’s love for Joseph had reached the deepest recesses of her heart (My) and become all-consuming (R). Like the brothers who accused Jacob in v. 8 of being *in manifest error* because of his intense love for Joseph, the women consider Zulaykhā *to be in manifest error* because of her ardent love for him (R).

<sup>31</sup> The talk among the wives of the notables of Egypt concerning Zulaykhā and Joseph is referred to as *plotting*, because it was carried out in secret (Kl) and was therefore tantamount to gossip. Al-Rāzī observes that the women’s talk here is called *plotting*, because they themselves wanted to look upon Joseph and knew that their gossip would force Zulaykhā to let them do so in order to exonerate herself of any blame. It is said that Zulaykhā invited forty women in total, five of whom were involved in the gossip (Bg, N). They sat together, and she gave each of them some citrons and a knife

said, "God be praised! This is no human being. This is naught but a noble angel!"

32 She said, "This is the one on whose account you blamed me. I indeed sought to lure him from himself, but he remained chaste. And if he does not do as I command, he shall surely be imprisoned; and he shall be among those humbled."

33 He said, "My Lord! Prison is dearer to me than that to which they call me. If Thou dost not turn their scheming away from me, I shall incline toward them and be among the ignorant." 34 So his Lord answered him, and turned their scheming away from him. Truly He is the Hearing, the Knowing. 35 Then it occurred to them, after they had seen the signs, that they should imprison him for a time. 36 Now two young men entered the prison with him. One of them

and told them to cut the fruit, inviting Joseph in the room at the same time (Qm). When they saw Joseph, "the rays of his beauty illuminated their interior temples" (My), and they *cut their hands* instead of the fruit, as they fell into a state of utter bewilderment and lost consciousness of themselves (My).

Here *God be praised!* is meant as an expression of amazement over God's creative power, in this case over His creating the likes of Joseph (Kl). By likening Joseph to a *noble angel* the women sought to express their utter amazement at his unparalleled, celestial beauty. It was also their way of acknowledging that Joseph did not commit any act of lewdness with Zulaykhā, since they saw in him his inner purity. Their vision of him made it clear to them that he was, like an angel, untainted by the normal passions that characterize the human condition (R).

32 Zulaykhā's statement *This is the one on whose account you blamed me* suggests that, since the women could not even withstand the sight of Joseph for one moment without losing their senses, she could not be blamed for what she did, as he was in her presence night and day (Ts). In so doing she admitted her "fault" and Joseph's innocence. *If he does not do as I command* refers to her original command to Joseph to lie with her; see 12:23c.

33 It is said that when the women heard Zulaykhā's ultimatum to Joseph, they supported her, telling him that he had no choice but to obey her command, lest he be thrown into prison

(R). Joseph's preference for prison over what the women were inciting him to do means that he preferred the next life over the fleeting pleasures of this life; succumbing to the women's suggestion would entail pleasure in this life, but punishment in the next, whereas entering prison would entail discomfort in this life, but great felicity in the next (R); he was forsaking a human love that was real but illicit for the Love of God. Joseph turned to God in humility (Kl) and asked for His assistance, since he knew that he could only be saved from his plight by God, not as a result of his own efforts (Qu).

34 God responded to Joseph and *turned their scheming away from him* by so strengthening his ability to resist the women that he actually accepted the hardships of prison (Aj). The connection between supplication and God's response is established elsewhere in the *Quran*, as in 40:60: *Call upon Me, and I shall respond to you.*

35 *Them* refers to the family of Potiphar and Zulaykhā or to those members of Potiphar's entourage with whom he consulted about this matter (Kl); and *the signs* refers to the indications of Joseph's innocence (JJ, Kl). The decision to imprison Joseph *for a time* was a temporary measure until the rumors about what transpired between Joseph and Zulaykhā had subsided (JJ; cf. Genesis 39:20).

36 Most commentaries state that the *two young men* who were in prison with Joseph were servants to the king of Egypt. One of them was his baker (T) and the other his wine carrier (JJ, T). The baker had plotted to poison the king. He was

said, “Truly I see myself [in a dream] pressing wine.” The other said, “Truly I see myself [in a dream] carrying bread atop my head, from which the birds eat.” “Inform us of its interpretation. Truly we see you as being among the virtuous.” <sup>37</sup> He said, “No food with which you are provided will come unto you, save that I shall inform you of its interpretation before it comes. This is among the things my Lord has taught me. I forsake the creed of a people who believe not in God, and they who are disbelievers in the Hereafter. <sup>38</sup> And I follow the creed of my fathers, Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. It is not for us to ascribe any partners unto God. That is from the bounty God has bestowed upon us and upon mankind, but most of mankind do not give thanks. <sup>39</sup> O my fellow prisoners! Are diverse lords better, or God, the One, the Paramount? <sup>40</sup> You worship apart from Him naught but names that you have named—you and your

caught and imprisoned, and the wine carrier was imprisoned as well, since the king thought that he had aided the baker in the attempt to kill him (R, T; cf. Genesis 40:1–3). The young man who had dreamed of the wine was the wine carrier, and the young man who had dreamed of the bread was the baker (Bg; for their dreams as narrated in Genesis, see 40:9–11, 16–17). They reportedly asked Joseph to interpret their dreams for them, because they had seen him interpret other people’s dreams (JJ). Al-Rāzī reports that, seeing Joseph’s virtuous character and kind behavior toward the other prison mates as well as his devout religious practices, the baker and the wine carrier concluded that he was *among the virtuous*, whose interpretation of dreams could therefore be trusted (cf. Genesis 40:6–8). For Joseph’s interpretation of these two dreams, see v. 41.

<sup>37–38</sup> In speaking of *food with which you are provided*, Joseph is alluding to the dreams that the young men in prison might have in their sleep, which he assures them he will be able to interpret before they become actualized as events in their waking state (Aj, JJ; cf. Genesis 40:8). For Joseph’s being taught the ability to interpret dreams, see 12:6c. Some interpret this verse to mean that God taught him these *things*, because he rejected *the creed of a people who believe not in God* (Bd). Alternately, the verse may be understood to mean that Joseph made mention of his God-given know-

ledge and his faith as a means to invite the young men to believe in God’s Oneness (Aj).

*That in That is from the bounty God has bestowed* is a reference to the affirmation of God’s Oneness (JJ) or an allusion to the fact stated by Joseph when he said, *It is not for us to ascribe any partners unto God* (R), meaning, “The nonascription of partners to God is among the bounties that God has bestowed.” For the idea that the majority are ungrateful, see 2:243; 10:60; 27:73; 40:61; 10:59–60c.

<sup>39–40</sup> After establishing the importance of prophecy in v. 38, v. 39 seeks to establish the basis of prophecy, namely, its Divine origin (R). The majority of prophets were faced with the reality of people’s worship of false divinities, and this was also the case with Joseph. This is why v. 39 begins with a demonstration of the futility of taking gods alongside God (R). The rhetorical question *Are diverse lords better, or God, the One, the Paramount?* alludes to the Quran’s teaching that if there were more than one god, the cosmic order would contain fissures and would go to ruin, whereas the existence of the One God, who is the Source of all reality, makes possible the order and beauty in the cosmos (R), as in 21:22: *Were there gods other than God in them, they would surely have been corrupted* (R).

After establishing the necessity, both logical and ontological, of God’s Oneness, v. 40 then



fathers—for which God has sent down no authority. Judgment belongs to God alone. He commands that you worship none but Him. That is the upright religion, but most of mankind know not. <sup>41</sup> O my fellow prisoners! As for one of you, he shall serve wine to his lord. But as for the other, he shall be crucified, and the birds will eat from his head. The matter about which you inquired has been decreed.” <sup>42</sup> And he said to the one of them whom he knew would be saved, “Mention me to your lord.” But Satan caused him to forget to make mention to his lord. So he remained in prison for several years. <sup>43</sup> And the king said, “Verily I see [in a dream] seven fat cows being eaten by seven lean ones; and

draws attention to the need to worship the one true God and not the false gods divinized by idolatrous people. For the Quran’s insistence that false gods are nothing more than the names assigned to them, see 7:71; 53:23. God’s command *that you worship none but Him* is analogous to 17:23: *Thy Lord decrees that you worship none but Him*. For *That is the upright religion, but most of mankind know not*, see 6:161c; 30:30c.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph offers his interpretation of the young men’s dreams: the wine carrier would be saved and restored to his former position (N) as a wine server to the king of Egypt (Kl; cf. Genesis 40:12–13); the baker would be crucified for his crime, and after his death the birds would *eat from his head* (My; cf. Genesis 40:18–19).

<sup>42</sup> Joseph told the wine carrier to mention him to the king of Egypt (Kl; cf. Genesis 40:14–15), but *Satan caused him to forget to make mention to his lord*; that is, he forgot to mention Joseph to the king (Kl). On account of this, Joseph’s stay in prison was prolonged *for several years*, a total of seven years according to most (IK, N).

*Satan caused him to forget to make mention to his lord* can also be translated, “Satan caused him to forget remembering his Lord,” in which case it would mean that at the particular moment when Joseph told the wine carrier, *Mention me to your lord*, he forgot to remember God (Kl, Q). As a consequence of his forgetfulness, God caused Joseph to be in prison *for several years*. According to Ibn ‘Abbās, had Joseph remembered God when he told the wine carrier to mention him to his lord, God would have released him from prison

earlier (Q). About this, the Prophet is reported to have said, “God have mercy on Joseph. Had it not been for a statement he made—*Mention me to your lord*—he would not have remained in the prison as long as he did” (T).

<sup>43</sup> The king’s request to his *notables*, namely, those in his entourage and in high offices in his kingdom (Kl), to give him their *opinion* means that he wanted them to interpret the dream for him (JJ). By *visions* here are meant true or veridical dreams (see 12:4c). The verb rendered *interpret* (‘*abara*) in *if you can interpret visions* comes from the root ‘*b-r*, which conveys the idea of “crossing over” from one side of something to the other. With respect to dream interpretation, the verb derived from this root connotes the notion of moving from the imaginal and symbolic forms in dreams to the actual meanings they symbolize (Bḍ). For the interpretation of the king’s dream, see vv. 47–49 (cf. Genesis 41:1–8).

<sup>44</sup> *Interpretation* translates *ta’wīl*, which etymologically conveys the sense of bringing something back to its origin. In the Quran, the term has several usages, among which are the interpretation of the multivalent, symbolic, or equivocal (*mutashābih*) verses (as in 3:7; see also 10:39) and the explanation of events whose meanings are not immediately clear (as in 18:87). In the context of dreams, *ta’wīl* means to arrive at the original or intended meaning of a dream. In the Islamic intellectual tradition, *ta’wīl* also came to signify more particularly the spiritual or esoteric hermeneutics that reveals the inner meaning of a verse and is often contrasted with *tafsīr*, which is



seven green heads of grain, and others dry. O notables! Give me your opinion on my vision, if you can interpret visions.” ④④ They said, “What confused dreams! And we are not experts in the interpretation of dreams!” ④⑤ Now the one who had been saved among the two said, remembering after a while, “I shall inform you of its interpretation, so send me forth.” ④⑥ “Joseph, O truthful one! Give us thine opinion concerning seven fat cows being eaten by seven lean ones, and seven green heads of grain, and others dry, that haply I may return to the people, that they might know.” ④⑦ He said, “You will sow diligently for seven years. Then whatever you harvest, leave in its ear, save a little that you eat. ④⑧ Then after this will come seven hard [years] which will devour that which you have saved in advance for them, save a little of that which you have stored. ④⑨ Then after this will come a year wherein people will be granted succor, and

concerned with its outward meaning. However, the distinction between these two terms is not rigid: the title of al-Ṭabarī’s famous commentary on the *Qurān* uses the word *ta’wīl*, not *tafsīr*, in its title. For the different uses and meanings of *ta’wīl* in the *Qurān*, see 3:7c; 7:53c.

*Dreams* translates *aḥlām*, which in this verse is a synonym for *ru’yā*, or *vision*, in v. 43, which can also mean a true or veridical dream. The notables describe the king’s vision as *confused dreams*, that is, as belonging to the category of mixed-up and false dreams, which stem from the internal chatter of the soul (*nafs*) or from demonic inspiration and are therefore not susceptible to meaningful interpretation (KI), because there is nothing in them corresponding to objective realities (My). By saying that they are not adept in the art of dream interpretation, the king’s notables could be referring to false dreams in particular or more likely to their inability to interpret dreams in general (KI).

④⑤ The wine carrier remembered Joseph’s words in v. 42 (Bg). *After a while* refers to a period of seven years (Bg), which corresponds to the length of time Joseph spent in prison (see 12:42c). The wine carrier managed to convince the king to allow him to consult with Joseph about the dream by pointing to his own experience with Joseph’s powers of dream interpretation: when in prison, Joseph interpreted the wine carrier’s dream, and

it came to pass exactly as he had said that it would (My); cf. Genesis 41:9–14.

④⑥ Returning to Joseph’s prison cell, the wine carrier calls him the *truthful one*, which can refer to the fact that Joseph interpreted his dream truthfully or to the fact that he had never seen Joseph tell a lie during their time together in prison (R; see also 12:36c). By telling Joseph that he sought his interpretation of the dream *that they might know*, the wine carrier was indicating that the king and his notables might come to know of his interpretation of the king’s dream (My) or of Joseph’s true rank and knowledge and thus release him from prison (My, Ṭs). When the wine carrier related the dream to Joseph, Joseph saw this as an opportunity to impress the king by interpreting the dream so that he could be set free. At the same time, Joseph also saw an opportunity to help the king, as a part of the dream signaled an agricultural crisis for the people of Egypt (see v. 48); cf. Genesis 41:14–24.

④⑦–④⑨ Joseph’s interpretation of the dream offers a window into what would happen during the next fifteen years of Egypt’s agrarian cycle. During the first phase, the Egyptians would *sow diligently for seven years*, as this would be a time of great fertility and abundance (R). The second phase would bring *seven hard [years]*, that is, a time of dearth that would be exceedingly difficult

wherein they will press [wine and oil].” <sup>50</sup> The king said, “Bring him to me!” So when the messenger came to him he said, “Return to your lord and ask him, ‘What of the women who cut their hands? Surely my Lord knows well their scheming!’” <sup>51</sup> He said, “What was your purpose when you sought to lure Joseph from himself?” They said, “God be praised! We know no evil against him.” The viceroy’s wife said, “Now the truth has come to light. It was I who sought to lure him from himself, and verily he is among the truthful.” <sup>52</sup> “This is so, that he may know that I betrayed him not in his absence. Truly God guides not the scheming of the treacherous. <sup>53</sup> But I absolve not my own soul. Surely the soul commands to evil, save whereon my Lord may show mercy. Truly my

for people (R). Joseph proposed to store up much of the harvest during the first phase, so that the people would have food during the second phase. The year of *succor* during which people will *press [wine and oil]* refers to the last year of the cycle, which would be a blessed year of much bounty for the people of Egypt (R); the pressing of oil and wine is an indication that there would be food in abundance once again; cf. Genesis 41:25–36.

<sup>50</sup> When the wine carrier, here called *the messenger*, returned and informed the king of Joseph’s interpretation of his dream, the king asked that he bring Joseph to him (JJ). But when the messenger approached Joseph in order to release him from prison, Joseph sought to exonerate himself, asking, *What of the women who cut their hands?* which is understood to have been Joseph’s request that the women be confronted by the king (JJ). The messenger then returned and informed the king of Joseph’s inquiry, and the king complied by gathering the women before him (JJ).

<sup>51</sup> Confronted by the king, the women said they did not know of any *evil against him*, which is to say that they absolved Joseph of any blame (Kl). As for Zulaykhā, it is at this point that her love for Joseph becomes fully real. Before, she had blamed him for a sin he did not commit, because her own desire was more important than his well-being (see v. 25). Later she admitted Joseph’s innocence, but only to a small group of women as a way of absolving herself of scorn in their eyes (see v. 32). Some commentators understand that at this juncture in the story her love for Joseph has grown so

strong that it has surpassed her own self-interest, so she spoke the truth about him (My). The narrative indicates that there was a progression in the degree of love in Zulaykhā’s own soul and therefore in her spiritual journey. Her initial attraction to Joseph was purely sensual, but by this point in the narrative she has overcome her lower self, and her infatuation with Joseph’s physical beauty has now been transformed into a spiritual love in which she is able to see Joseph’s inward beauty, much like Potiphar did when he first saw him in the marketplace (see 12:21–22c). The catalyst here seems to have been Joseph’s inner virtues, marked by his quality of truthfulness, which Zulaykhā recognized when she referred to him as *among the truthful*.

<sup>52</sup> The speaker here is Joseph, who seeks to absolve himself of any blame before Potiphar (JJ, My, R, T). Alternately, the speaker here could be Zulaykhā (Kl, R, Ts).

<sup>53</sup> Although some have argued that the speaker here is Zulaykhā (IK, R), the majority of commentators see these words as Joseph’s (Bd, Bg, Kl, Q, Ts, Z) and thus a continuation of his statement in v. 52. It is said that Joseph uttered *I absolve not my own soul* out of humility (Kl) and because he wanted to draw attention to the fact that it was God Who protected him from falling into sin (Bd; see 12:24c).

*Surely the soul commands to evil* plays a foundational role in the Muslim understanding of moral psychology and the structure of the human soul. Islamic sources identify three levels of the

Lord is Forgiving, Merciful.” <sup>54</sup> And the king said, “Bring him to me, that I might reserve him exclusively for myself.” Then when he had spoken with him, he said, “Truly this day thou shalt be of high rank and trusted in our presence.” <sup>55</sup> He said, “Set me over the storehouses of the land. Truly I am a skilled keeper.” <sup>56</sup> And thus did We establish Joseph in the land, that there he might settle wheresoever he will. We cause Our Mercy to fall upon whomsoever We will, and We neglect not the reward of the virtuous. <sup>57</sup> And the reward of the Hereafter is better for those who believe and are reverent. <sup>58</sup> And the brothers of Joseph came and entered upon him, and he recognized them, while they knew him not. <sup>59</sup> And when he had arranged for their provisions, he said, “Bring me a brother of yours from your father. Do you not see that I give full

soul on the basis of Quranic references. The first level is the “soul that commands to evil” (*al-naḥs al-ammārah bi’l-sū’*, based on the present verse); this is the soul that calls human beings to submit to base desires and those thoughts and actions that lead to forgetfulness of God and go against His Command. Next is the *blaming soul* (*al-naḥs al-lawwāmah*; 75:2), which reproaches people for their evil states and forgetfulness of God, while actively attempting to effect change within them for the better. Finally, the highest kind of soul is the *soul at peace* (*al-naḥs al-muṭma’innah*; 89:27), which has conquered the lower self and resides in peace in the remembrance of God; see 75:2c; 89:27c.

<sup>54–55</sup> After having summoned Joseph and *spoken with him*, the king realizes his intelligence, wisdom, and virtue (Q, T); he then expresses a desire to reserve Joseph’s abilities *exclusively* for himself and eventually sets him over the *storehouses of the land*. Cf. Genesis 41:37–44.

<sup>56–57</sup> As in v. 21, *thus did We establish Joseph in the land* (cf. Genesis 41:45) comes after Joseph undergoes a period of trial and hardship. The purpose of establishing Joseph in Egypt in v. 21 is so that God *might teach him the interpretation of events*, that is, dreams (see 12:21–22c), whereas in v. 56 it is in order that Joseph *might settle wheresoever he will*. These two verses are therefore connected, since it was only after Joseph interpreted several dreams that he was given such a powerful position in Egypt that he could choose

to live *wheresoever he will*, which some interpret to mean that Joseph could “establish his home in any of Egypt’s cities because of his control over all of them” (Kā). It is also said that when Potiphar died, the king of Egypt gave Joseph Potiphar’s former position of being in charge of the treasury of Egypt. By extension, this would also mean that Joseph was conferred the title of ‘Azīz.

For God’s not neglecting *the reward of the virtuous*, see also v. 90 and 11:115. In several verses, *the reward of the Hereafter* is spoken of as *greater* than the reward of this world (16:41), and the Hereafter itself is described as *better for thee than this life* (93:4). This is because *the life of this world is naught but diversion and play*, whereas *the Abode of the Hereafter is life indeed* (29:64).

<sup>58</sup> The brothers came to Egypt because the famine that had afflicted Egypt had also affected Canaan (cf. Genesis 42:1–8), and they sought to purchase some of the provisions that Joseph had stored up during the seven years of Egypt’s agricultural prosperity (see 12:47–49c; Bḍ, Kl). The brothers did not recognize Joseph because a long period of time had elapsed since they last saw him. Moreover, he now stood before them adorned in rich Egyptian garments, and their awe of him naturally prevented them from recognizing him as their brother, whom they assumed had perished after they had thrown him into the well so many years before (Bḍ; see 12:15c).

<sup>59</sup> *Provisions* here denotes the food that the brothers had purchased from Joseph (Kl).

measure, and that I am the best of hosts? <sup>60</sup> But if you bring him not unto me, you shall have no measure from me, nor shall you come nigh unto me.” <sup>61</sup> They said, “We shall seek to lure him from his father; that we shall surely do.” <sup>62</sup> He said to his servant boys, “Put their merchandise in their saddlebags. Perchance they will recognize it when they have gone back to their people; perchance they will return.” <sup>63</sup> So when they returned to their father, they said, “O father! The measure has been withheld from us. So send our brother with us that we might obtain the measure. We shall surely be his keepers.” <sup>64</sup> He said, “Should I entrust him to you as I entrusted his brother to you aforetime? But God is the best of keepers, and He is the most Merciful of the merciful.” <sup>65</sup> And when they opened their belongings, they found their merchandise had been returned to them. They said, “O father! What [more] do we seek? This is our merchandise

The brother *from your father* whom Joseph has in mind is considered by commentators to be Benjamin (JJ; see 12:8c), although his name is not mentioned in the Quran. The ten brothers who came to Egypt brought with them eleven camels and were requesting eleven camel-loads of food, ten for themselves and one for Benjamin, who was at home (Q). But Joseph requested that the other brother who was not present be brought to him as proof that there was in fact another dependent who would justify their purchase of another camel-load of food during a time of scarcity (Q). His question is seen as a subtle way of denying the brothers their request without accusing them of wrongdoing, softening the rigor of *I give full measure* by pointing out that he is *the best of hosts* (R).

<sup>60–61</sup> Cf. Genesis 42:9–20. In the Quranic account Joseph tells his brothers that without meeting his request the next time they came, he would not do business with them, nor would they even be allowed to enter the city (Bg), since their failure to meet his condition would mean that they were lying when requesting the extra camel-load of food. The brothers assured Joseph that the next time they would return with their eleventh brother, and they knew they would need to come to Egypt for more food in the future.

<sup>62</sup> *Their merchandise* refers to those goods that the brothers had presented to Joseph in

exchange for food (Bg, Z) or the actual price (*athmān*) the brothers paid for the food (JJ, My, T). By returning all of the merchandise to the brothers, Joseph sought to gain their confidence and reliance upon him for future transactions, with the hidden intent that they would soon return with their brother Benjamin; cf. Genesis 42:25–26.

<sup>63</sup> *The measure has been withheld from us* refers to the rest of the food that the brothers sought to acquire (My), namely, the eleventh camel-load of food (see v. 59; Bg). *That we might obtain the measure* means “that we may obtain the food” (Bg), that is, the full measure of food they were seeking.

<sup>64</sup> *His brother* is a reference to Joseph (JJ; see 12:15c). *God is the best of keepers* implies Jacob’s trust in God and his resignation of the whole affair to Him (Aj). For God as *the most Merciful of the merciful*, see also v. 92; 7:151; 21:83.

<sup>65</sup> Here the brothers appeal to Joseph’s gesture of goodwill in order to convince Jacob to allow them to take Benjamin (Bg), whose presence before Joseph was essential for obtaining more food. The *meager rations* are the food that the brothers already had in their possession, namely, the ten camel-loads’ worth (see 12:59c), which was not enough to sustain them (Kl); cf. Genesis 42:27–36.

returned unto us! Now we can provide for our family, and keep watch over our brother, while getting another camel-load—these are meager rations!” <sup>66</sup> He said, “I will not send him forth with you till you give me a solemn pledge before God that you will surely bring him back to me, unless you are surrounded.” So when they gave their solemn pledge, he said, “God is Guardian over what we say.” <sup>67</sup> And he said, “O my sons! Enter not by one gate, but enter by separate gates. Yet I cannot avail you aught against God. Judgment belongs to God alone. I trust in Him; and let those who trust trust in Him.” <sup>68</sup> And when they entered whence their father had commanded them, it did not avail them aught against God, but it fulfilled a need in Jacob’s soul. Truly he was possessed of knowledge because of that which We taught him, but most of mankind know not. <sup>69</sup> And when they entered upon Joseph, he drew his brother close to him-

<sup>66</sup> Jacob has his sons make a solemn pledge that they will return Benjamin to him, as he did earlier with Joseph, according to one report (see 12:15c). The only difference is that, with respect to Benjamin, Jacob also includes the caveat *unless you are surrounded*, which is a general condition (Z) interpreted to mean “unless you come to a situation in which you cannot uphold the oath” (JJ). *God is Guardian over what we say* means that God is a witness to the oath (R); cf. Genesis 42:36–38. The same statement is uttered by Moses in 28:28 when he takes an oath with his future father-in-law.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Genesis 43:11–15. Jacob’s advice to his sons to enter by *separate gates* was given to help them avoid the evil eye (R), which in many traditional cultures, especially those of the Mediterranean and Near East, is associated with bad omens that afflict people because they are objects of envy. Jacob sought to protect the brothers from the evil eye upon entering Egypt, since they were very handsome (Bd, N) and had fallen victim to the evil eye the last time they were there (Aj). By entering through different doors instead of one door in a large group, the brothers’ presence would be more discreet, and thus they would be less prone to the effects of the evil eye. Other commentators do not associate this verse with a fear of the evil eye, but simply with practical caution against attracting unwanted attention, since the

brothers had become recognizable and might have attracted hostility or jealousy if they entered as a single group (R). *I cannot avail you aught against God* means that, despite Jacob’s advice to his sons, they cannot escape what God has destined for them (Bd, Z).

<sup>68</sup> *It did not avail them aught against God* means that, despite the measures the brothers took to avoid having evil befall them on their second trip to Egypt, they would nonetheless soon undergo a major trial (Bd; see vv. 70–82). *But it fulfilled a need in Jacob’s soul*; that is, Jacob’s advice to his sons, along with their acceptance of it, was a means to assuage Jacob’s fear of losing his children (R).

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Genesis 43:29–31. When the brothers came to Joseph, he honored them and treated them kindly. He managed to inform Benjamin in private that he was his brother (IK, Kl) and explained all that had happened to him (IK). He then gave Benjamin solace, telling him not to be saddened by what the brothers had done, noting that these events were in the past and according to God’s Will (Bg). He also asked Benjamin not to mention their private meeting to the other brothers (IK). Ibn Kathīr states that Joseph and Benjamin then devised a plan that would ensure that Benjamin would remain with him (see vv. 70–82); al-Ṭabarī, however, says that the plan was not known to Benjamin.

self and said, “Truly I am your brother; so be not distressed on account of that which they used to do.” <sup>70</sup> And when he had made ready their provisions, he put the drinking cup into his brother’s saddlebag. Then a herald cried out, “O you men of the caravan! Truly you are thieves!” <sup>71</sup> Turning toward them, they said, “What are you missing?” <sup>72</sup> They said, “We are missing the goblet of the king.” “For whosoever brings it forth, there shall be a camel-load. I shall be its guarantor.” <sup>73</sup> They said, “By God, you certainly know that we came not to work corruption in the land, and we are not thieves.” <sup>74</sup> They said, “And what will be the recompense for it if you be liars?” <sup>75</sup> They said, “Its recompense will be that he in whose saddlebag it is found—he himself shall be its recompense. Thus do we recompense the wrongdoers.” <sup>76</sup> Then he began with their baggage,

<sup>70–71</sup> *His brother’s saddlebag* means Benjamin’s bag, filled with his belongings (Ṭ). As mentioned in v. 72, the drinking cup was *the goblet of the king*. It was used by him not only for drinking, but also for measuring food (Ṭ); it is said to have been made of gold and studded with jewels (JJ). Jacob had a rule about stealing— whoever was caught stealing would be distanced from him—so Joseph placed the goblet in Benjamin’s bag, because that would make Benjamin appear to be culpable for the “crime” (Aj, Kl).

<sup>72–73</sup> Joseph’s companions were the ones who said, *We are missing the goblet of the king* (Ṭs), but the declaration for *a camel-load* of food (JJ) was uttered by the herald (Kl, Ṭs). *I shall be its guarantor* means whoever is able to produce the cup will be given the camel-load (Ṭ).

<sup>74–75</sup> The brothers’ response, *he himself shall be its recompense*, means that whoever is the one in whose bag the king’s goblet is found will be punished for his crime by being given over by the brothers to Joseph and his entourage. It is said that this was the brothers’ custom when dealing with thieves, namely, to give the thief over to the one from whom he had stolen, just as the latter’s property had been taken over by the thief (Th). The brothers then let Joseph search their bags (JJ).

<sup>76</sup> *Thus did We devise a scheme for Joseph* indicates that the plan to place the cup in Benjamin’s bag was based on Divine Revelation (*wahy*), because the ultimate goal of the plot was for God

to show His Solicitude to Joseph’s brothers (Aj). Some commentators say that the king’s rules for theft were that if someone was caught stealing, the person would be physically beaten for the crime and then charged double the worth of the item that had been stolen (R). Thus, *under the king’s law, Joseph could not have taken his brother unless God willed*: if Joseph had followed the king’s law, which would have been the normal course of action, he would not have been able to keep Benjamin; Benjamin would have been free to go back with his brothers after the king’s stipulated punishment. Instead, God willed that the brothers would themselves put forward the punishment for theft according to their own custom (see 12:74–75c), because of which Joseph’s plan was carried out (R).

For *We raise in degrees whomsoever We will*, see 6:83c; see also 40:15, where God is referred to as *the Raiser of degrees*. In the present context, *above every possessor of knowledge is a knower* means that, although Joseph’s brothers were learned and possessed of knowledge, Joseph had more knowledge than they (R), and that all knowledge ends with God (Aj), who is referred to as the *Knower* throughout the *Quran*. This verse also has a more universal import and is often cited in a more general context by Muslim writers. It points to the hierarchy of knowledge and the fact that no matter how much knowledge a human being gains, there is always a higher degree of knowledge, and the highest is God’s Knowledge.



before the baggage of his brother. Then he removed it from his brother's baggage. Thus did We devise a scheme for Joseph. Under the king's law, he could not have taken his brother unless God willed. We raise in degrees whomsoever We will, and above every possessor of knowledge is a knower. <sup>(77)</sup> They said, "If he has stolen, a brother of his had stolen aforetime." But Joseph kept it secret in his soul and disclosed it not unto them. He said, "You are in a worse position! And God knows best concerning that which you describe." <sup>(78)</sup> They said, "O viceroy! He has a venerable, aged father, so take one of us in his place. Truly we see you as being among the virtuous." <sup>(79)</sup> He said, "God be my refuge, that we should take any save the one with whom we found our property. For then we would surely be wrongdoers." <sup>(80)</sup> So when they despaired of [swaying] him, they conferred privately. The eldest of them said, "Do you not know that your father has taken a solemn pledge from you before God, and earlier you neglected Joseph? Thus I shall not depart from this land till my father grants me leave, or God renders judgment upon me, and He is the best of judges!" <sup>(81)</sup> Return unto your father and say, 'O father! Verily your son has committed theft. And we bore witness to that which we knew, but we are not keepers of the unseen.' <sup>(82)</sup> So

<sup>77</sup> *A brother of his had stolen aforetime* is a reference to Joseph, who, when he was younger, is said to have stolen an idol from his maternal grandfather and destroyed it, lest it be worshipped (JJ, IK, R). What Joseph kept . . . secret in his soul refers to his response to his brothers, *You are in a worse position*, which he said to himself and did not voice aloud (Z). By it he meant that the brothers were in a worse position than Benjamin, since they stole him (Joseph) from their father and treated him unjustly, and Benjamin did not participate in this act (JJ, Z).

<sup>78–79</sup> For the way Joseph came to occupy Potiphar's former rank and position of *viceroy*, see 12:56–57c. Benjamin's *venerable, aged father* refers to Jacob. By mentioning their father, the brothers were saying that Jacob loves Benjamin more than them, and that since Benjamin has been a means of solace for Jacob in place of Joseph, not getting Benjamin back would cause him more grief (JJ).

<sup>80</sup> *The eldest of them* refers to Reuben (not named in the *Qur'an*, but recorded as such in the

commentaries; see 12:10c). For the *solemn pledge* that the brothers took with Jacob, see v. 66. The brothers *neglected Joseph* when they failed to take care of him (Bg, Ts) and, by extension, when they broke the vow they had made to Jacob to return Joseph safely (Ts; see also 12:15c). Reuben states that he will not leave Egypt until either his *father grants him leave*, that is, Jacob calls him to return home (see also v. 83), or *God renders judgment upon him*, referring to God's decision to return Benjamin to him or to send him back home without Benjamin (Bg). For God as *the best of judges* and other cognate expressions in the *Qur'an*, see 7:87c.

<sup>81–82</sup> *We are not keepers of the unseen* means that there was no way the brothers could have foreseen that Benjamin would "steal" in Egypt when they made their pact with Jacob (Z). By stating this point, the brothers wished to absolve themselves of breaking the oath, implicitly invoking the exceptional condition that Jacob included in his pledge with them (see v. 66). The *town* refers to the people of Egypt, and the *caravan* to



ask the town wherein we were, and the caravan with which we approached. Verily we are truthful.” <sup>83</sup> He said, “Nay, your souls have seduced you in this matter. Beautiful patience! It may be that God will bring them to me altogether. Truly He is the Knowing, the Wise.” <sup>84</sup> And he turned away from them and said, “Oh, how great is my grief for Joseph!” His eyes had turned white with grief, and he was choked with anguish. <sup>85</sup> They said, “By God, wilt thou go on remembering Joseph till thou art ill to the point of death, or till thou hast perished?” <sup>86</sup> He said, “I complain of my sorrow and grief to God alone. And I know from God that which you know not. <sup>87</sup> O my sons! Go and inquire about Joseph and his brother and despair not of God’s Comfort; truly none despairs of God’s Comfort save the disbelieving people.” <sup>88</sup> So when they entered upon him they said, “O viceroy! Affliction has befallen us and our people. We bring but meager merchandise; yet grant us full measure and be charitable unto us. Truly God shall recompense the charitable.” <sup>89</sup> He said, “Do you

the people of Canaan (JJ). It is said that when the latter returned to Jacob, they testified to the brothers’ truthfulness (JJ).

<sup>83</sup> Jacob’s words here are similar to his response to news of the loss of Joseph in v. 18. The pronoun *them* refers to Joseph, Benjamin, and Reuben, who were in still in Egypt (see v. 80; KI); such a statement is a kind of prophecy, since Joseph was still not known to be alive (see commentary on 12:85–87).

<sup>84</sup> It is said that in his sadness, Jacob wept so much that he went blind (My) or that his eyesight became very weak (KI), indicated by *his eyes had turned white*.

<sup>85–86</sup> The brothers’ question, motivated by love and compassion for their father (Ts), is a figurative way of telling him that they fear for his demise if he continues to grieve over Joseph (IK). That Jacob complains of his *sorrow and grief to God alone* harkens back to v. 18, where he counsels himself to have *beautiful patience*, which is a form of patience in which one complains only to God about one’s suffering and not to other human beings; see 12:18c. *I know from God that which you know not* (see also v. 96) is interpreted by some to refer to Jacob’s intuitive knowledge that Joseph was still alive (R); see also vv. 84, 87; 12:18c.

<sup>87</sup> Benjamin was in custody, which is why Jacob sent his sons to inquire about him, but Jacob also told them to *inquire about Joseph*; he believed Joseph was still alive, because he had either seen this in a dream or been informed by the Angel of Death that the latter had not taken Joseph’s soul (Q). *Despair not of God’s Comfort* means that the brothers should not lose hope in God’s Mercy (JJ, N; for their forgiveness, see vv. 92, 97). This verse is similar in meaning to 39:53; *Despair not of God’s Mercy. Truly God forgives all sins. Truly He is the Forgiving, the Merciful*.

<sup>88</sup> The brothers went to Egypt in order to inquire about Joseph and Benjamin in accordance with Jacob’s wishes. When they came to Joseph (who was still not known to them as Joseph), they complained about their *affliction*, by which is meant their intense hunger (Bd) as well as their *meager merchandise*, referring to what little goods they had with them to trade for food (Bd, Q); the brothers were hoping their goods would suffice them in obtaining a *full measure* of food. *And be charitable unto us* is understood as a request for the return of Benjamin (Q).

<sup>89–90</sup> Joseph’s question is about their separating him from Benjamin when they were young and their harming him (Joseph) and perpetrating

know what you have done with Joseph and his brother, when you were ignorant?” 90 They said, “Art thou indeed Joseph?” He said, “I am Joseph and this is my brother. God has been gracious unto us. Verily whosoever is reverent and patient—surely God neglects not the reward of the virtuous.” 91 “By God!” they said, “God has preferred thee over us, and we were at fault.” 92 He said, “There is no reproach against you this day. God will forgive you. And He is the most Merciful of the merciful.” 93 Take this shirt of mine and cast it upon my father’s face; he will come to see. And bring me your family, altogether.” 94 And as the caravan set off, their father said, “Truly I sense the scent of Joseph, if you think me not senile!” 95 They said, “By God! Truly thou art astray as of old.” 96 And when the bearer of glad tidings came, he cast it upon his face and he was restored to sight. He said, “Did I not say unto you that I know from God that which you know not?” 97 They said, “O father! Seek forgiveness for us

injustices against Benjamin, such as debasing and reviling him (Kl). Joseph then makes an excuse for his brothers’ wrong actions (Kl, R), as he says, *when you were ignorant*, which refers to either their ignorance of the vileness of their actions or their general state of ignorance on account of their youth (Kl). It is said that the brothers recognized that their interlocutor was Joseph when he spoke these words to them, or that they recognized him when he smiled, showing his front teeth (Bd), or when he removed his crown (Sh). For *Surely God neglects not the reward of the virtuous*, see 9:120; 11:115; 12:56.

91–92 Cf. Genesis 45:5–8. Joseph’s statement *There is no reproach against you this day* is described in some sources as “a beautiful form of forgiveness” (Kl). *Reproach* here can also mean physical punishment (*‘iqāb*; Kl). These words of forgiveness and comfort uttered by Joseph were cited by the Prophet Muhammad when he too forgave members of his tribe who had been his oppressors. It is said that, during the conquest of Makkah, when the Prophet had overtaken the city and the Makkan idolaters had no hope of escape, the Prophet addressed the Quraysh, “O party of the Quraysh! What do you see me doing with you?” They answered, “Good. You are a noble brother and the son of a noble brother.” Then the Prophet said, “Verily I say to you as Joseph said to

his brothers: *there is no reproach against you*. Go, for you are free.”

93 Joseph’s order to have his shirt cast over Jacob’s face was reportedly based on Divine inspiration (Kl, My). The shirt is said to be the same shirt made from the silk of Paradise that Gabriel brought to Joseph when he was in the well (see 12:15c; My); cf. Genesis 45:9–13.

94 Jacob’s words were addressed to those of his tribe who were with him (My). Despite the fact that the caravan was on its way from Egypt to Canaan, Jacob was able to perceive Joseph’s scent because of the heavenly smell that came from his shirt (Bg, My). Some say that this was a miracle because Jacob and Joseph were prophets (My).

95 Cf. 12:85–86c. By being *astray* here the brothers mean Jacob’s overabundant love for Joseph and his hope to meet with him, which they thought unreasonable under the circumstances as they knew them (JJ).

96 Cf. Genesis 45:9–13, 27–28. *The bearer of glad tidings* who cast Joseph’s shirt upon Jacob’s face was the same brother (see 12:10c; JJ) who had earlier interceded with the brothers when they plotted to kill Joseph (see 12:15c). For Jacob’s question, see his announcement in 12:85–86c.

97–98 This conversation occurred after the brothers returned home from Egypt (Q). Some

from our sins. Truly we were at fault.” <sup>98</sup> He said, “I shall indeed seek forgiveness for you from my Lord. Truly He is Forgiving, Merciful.” <sup>99</sup> So when they entered upon Joseph, he drew his parents close to himself and said, “Enter Egypt in security, if God wills!” <sup>100</sup> And he raised his parents up to the throne, and they [all] fell prostrate toward him. He said, “O my father! This is the fulfillment of my vision; my Lord has made it come true. He was good to me when He brought me forth from prison, and brought thee from the desert, after Satan incited evil between my brothers and me. Indeed, my Lord is Subtle in that which He wills. Truly He is the Knower, the Wise.” <sup>101</sup> My Lord! Thou hast given me something of sovereignty, and taught me the interpretation of events. Originator of the heavens and the earth! Thou art my Protector in this world and in the Hereafter! Take me as a submitter unto Thyself, and admit me to the company of the righteous.” <sup>102</sup> These are among the accounts of the unseen

record that Jacob delayed his prayer for forgiveness a certain period of time (Q, R), perhaps to ascertain whether they were being sincere and truthful (Z).

<sup>99</sup> For *enter . . . in security, if God wills* with reference to the Prophet Muhammad and his followers, see 48:27, which states that the Muslims *shall enter the Sacred Mosque in security, if God wills*.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Genesis 46:5–7. Joseph *raised his parents up to the throne*; that is, he seated them (JJ) upon the king’s throne (Kl). For Joseph’s vision of which this verse is the *fulfillment*, see 12:4c. *They [all]* refers to Joseph’s parents and his eleven brothers, which correspond to the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars, respectively (N). Prostrating toward someone was a way of greeting and honoring a person, much like standing up for someone out of respect or kissing the hand (Qu, N).

**Joseph** does not mention the well from which he was delivered, only the *prison*, since he had already told his brothers in v. 97, *There is no reproach against you this day* (N). Joseph’s blaming Satan for having *incited evil* between himself and his brothers is tantamount to his making an excuse for them for their wrong actions (Qu; see also 12:89–90c). Joseph’s description of God as *Subtle in that which He wills* means that the manner in which God carries out His Will is subtle (N).

<sup>101</sup> Joseph was granted *something of sovereignty* since he had the highest standing in Egypt next to the king (see 12:56–57c.). For God as the *Originator of the heavens and the earth*, see 2:117; 6:14, 101; 35:1; 39:46; 42:11; see also 6:14c; 35:1c. God is described throughout the Quran as a *Protector*, as in 2:257: *God is the Protector of those who believe*. Joseph says that God is his *Protector in this world and in the Hereafter*, since those under God’s protection are considered His friends (*awliyāʾ*, a term that derives from the same root as *Protector*), upon whom *no fear shall come* (10:62) and for whom *are glad tidings in the life of this world and in the Hereafter* (10:64). Joseph’s supplication to God, *Take me as a submitter unto Thyself*, is a request to God that he not die except in a state of complete submission to God’s Will (as in 3:102: *And die not except in submission*) and in accordance with the creed of Abraham (see 22:78). For a discussion of the broader meaning of submission (*islām*) in the Quran, see the essay “The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions.”

<sup>102</sup> This verse, addressed to the Prophet Muhammad, points out that he was not with Joseph’s brothers when they planned what they would do to Joseph (R). This verse thus argues for the miraculous nature of the Prophet’s knowledge, since he was given the unseen details of the

which We reveal unto thee. And thou wert not with them when they decided upon their affair and plotted. <sup>103</sup> And most of mankind, however much thou mightest desire, are not believers. <sup>104</sup> And thou asketh of them no reward for it; it is naught but a reminder for the worlds. <sup>105</sup> How many a sign is there in the heavens and on the earth by which they pass; yet they turn away from them! <sup>106</sup> And most of them believe not in God, save that they ascribe partners unto Him. <sup>107</sup> Do they feel secure from the coming of an overwhelming punishment from God upon them? Or from the coming of the Hour suddenly, while they are unaware? <sup>108</sup> Say, "This is my way. I call unto God with clear sight—I, and those who follow me. Glory be to God! And I am not among those who ascribe partners unto God." <sup>109</sup> And We sent none before thee, save men unto whom We sent revelation among the people of the towns. Have they not journeyed

story of Joseph without being physically present during its unfolding or, according to Islamic teachings, learning of it from human teachers or through books (R), since he is considered *the unlettered Prophet* (7:157).

<sup>103</sup> For *most of mankind . . . are not believers*, see 11:17c; 13:11; 40:61. Elsewhere in the Quran, the Prophet's concern for his people (and, by extension, all of humanity) is addressed (see 9:128, 18:6, 26:3), which is part of the broader Quranic theme that it is only God Who guides and only God Who causes people to believe; see 2:272; 3:20; 3:128–29; 28:56.

<sup>104</sup> For the meaning of this verse, see commentary on 6:90, where the Prophet is instructed to say, *I ask not of you any reward for it. It is naught but a reminder for the worlds*.

<sup>105</sup> People continuously encounter signs and proofs that indicate the existence of their Creator as well as His Wisdom, Power, and Oneness, yet they do not reflect upon the meaning of these signs, nor do they take a lesson from them (Bd); thus 6:157 asks rhetorically, *Who does greater wrong than one who denies the signs of God and turns away from them?* Regarding the variety and significance of God's signs, see the commentary on 45:3–6. More specifically, this verse relates to the previous civilizations and peoples who have passed away and left vestiges behind, from which those who come later are meant to take a lesson,

but instead fail to do so (N). Regarding the lessons to be derived from past nations, see 30:9c.

<sup>106</sup> It is said that this verse was revealed about the Makkan idolaters, who believed in God but also worshipped other gods alongside Him (Kl). For more on ascribing partners to God, see 4:48c. The gods that one might place on a par with God are not limited to physical idols, but can also be other elements that one "idolizes," such as one's caprices or personal desires, power, or knowledge (see 25:43; 45:23).

<sup>107</sup> For the rhetorical question *Do they feel secure?* (regarding God's Punishment), see also 16:45–47; 17:68–69; 67:16–17. Here the question is about the Makkan idolaters (Ts). The *overwhelming punishment* refers to a thunderbolt (JJ, Ts) or some kind of enveloping punishment (Bg); *the Hour* refers to the Day of Judgment. For the sudden nature of the arrival of the Last Day and the general state of heedlessness in which it will find most people, see 6:31c; 7:188; 21:40.

<sup>108</sup> Here *way* can refer to either the Prophet's wont (Bg) or the religion he brought (Bg, Z; cf. 16:125). By *clear insight* is meant a type of knowledge that can distinguish with certainty between truth and falsehood (Bg).

<sup>109</sup> Some have said that this verse was revealed as a response to the Makkans' question in 6:8, *Why has not an angel been sent down unto him?* (Q). On the significance of prophets being

upon the earth and observed how those before them fared in the end? And the Abode of the Hereafter is better for those who are reverent. Do you not understand? <sup>110</sup> Till, when the messengers despaired and thought that they were deemed liars, Our help came unto them, and whosoever We willed was saved. And Our Might shall not be turned back from the guilty people. <sup>111</sup> Certainly in their stories is a lesson for those possessed of intellect. It is not a fabricated account; rather, it is a confirmation of that which came before it, and an elaboration of all things, and a guidance and a mercy for a people who believe.

human beings and speaking the language of their people, see 6:8–9; 11:12; 14:10; 17:94; 18:110; 23:33; 25:7; 35:15; 41:6; 54:24; 14:4c; 14:11c; 64:6c. Many commentators understand the mention of *the people of the towns* to signify that nomads were never chosen to be prophets since town dwellers were, according to them, more knowledgeable and refined (Q, R, Z), and neither were women chosen as prophets (see 16:43c), though some believe that the mention of *men* signifies that they were human beings, not angels (Z; see 17:94–95c).

**For** *Have they not journeyed upon the earth and observed how those before them fared in the end?* see 30:9c (see also 12:105c). For the superiority of the Hereafter to this world, see 12:56–57c, although 12:57 mentions the *reward of the Hereafter* rather than the *Abode of the Hereafter*.

**110** For the prophets' human reactions to the trials they encountered, see 2:214; 15:97; 21:83; 26:3. For God's exacting vengeance upon the *guilty people*, see 32:22.

**111** By *their stories* is meant the stories of the messengers mentioned throughout the Quran (JJ). For *those possessed of intellect*, see 5:100c; 38:29c; 39:9c. For the fact that the Quran is not *fabricated*, but rather confirms the scriptures that came before it, see 10:37; cf. commentary on 10:15–17. Like the Quran itself (see also 16:64, 89), the Torah given to Moses is also described as *an exposition of all things, and a guidance and a mercy* (see 6:154 and commentary).



## 36

### Yā Sīn

#### *Yā Sīn*

There is consensus among all scholars that *Yā Sīn* is a Makkan *sūrah* from the early part of the middle Makkan period. Some maintain that the whole of the *sūrah* is Makkan, though many commentators believe that v. 12 is from the Madinan period. The *sūrah* takes its name from the mention of the Arabic letters *yā*’ and *sīn* in the opening verse. Some also refer to it as “The Heart of the Quran,” after a well-known *ḥadīth*: “Everything has a heart, and the heart of the Quran is *Yā Sīn*. Whosoever recites *Yā Sīn*, God records for him the recitation of the Quran ten times for his recitation of it” (Āl, Q).

Seen as the heart of the Quran, this *sūrah* plays an important role in traditional Islamic piety. Many Muslims recite *Yā Sīn* regularly as part of their supererogatory devotions, and it is often the only *sūrah* longer than a page or so that Muslims have memorized in full. A famous *ḥadīth* says, “Recite *Yā Sīn* over your dead” (Q, Sy). It is thus recited for those who are close to death, those who have just died, and at the graves of loved ones. It is also recited for those who are sick, for another *ḥadīth* states, “Verily in the Quran there is a *sūrah* that heals through its recitation and forgives through its being heard—indeed, that is *Sūrat Yā Sīn*” (Āl, Q). *Yā Sīn* is also recited by many Muslims after the performance of the obligatory prayers in the morning and the evening. Regarding the latter, another report, sometimes recorded as a *ḥadīth*, states, “Whosoever recites *Sūrat Yā Sīn* at night, desiring the Face of God, is forgiven during that night” (Q, IK). Although many believe that the exhortation to recite *Yā Sīn* in the morning is a *ḥadīth*, it most likely derives from a saying attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās: “Whosoever recites *Yā Sīn* when he awakens is given ease for his day until the evening comes. And whosoever reads it in the midst of the night is given ease for his night until he awakens” (Q).

Several scholars maintain that *Yā Sīn* is the heart of the Quran because it addresses its central teachings regarding God, prophethood, and the Hereafter. The *sūrah* begins with an address to the Prophet that clarifies both his mission and the nature of revelation (vv. 1–12) followed by a parable regarding those



who reject prophets (vv. 13–30) that segues into a discussion of Resurrection and the signs of it in the natural world (vv. 31–44). Responses to various objections common to the disbelievers and the consequences of them (vv. 45–52) then lead into a discussion of the disparate ends of the disbelievers and the believers (vv. 53–68), which concludes with another reflection on the nature of Muhammad’s prophethood (vv. 69–70). The final section returns to a discussion of the signs in the created order that serve to inform one of God’s creative power and ability to resurrect (vv. 71–81) and concludes with an affirmation of God’s Omnipotence (vv. 82–83).

## In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

① *Yā. Sīn.* ② By the Wise Quran, ③ truly thou art among the message bearers, ④ upon a straight path, ⑤ a revelation of the Mighty, the Merciful, ⑥ that thou mayest warn a people whose fathers were not warned, such that they were

1 The Arabic letters *yā* and *sīn* are among the separated letters (*al-muqattaʿāt*) that are found at the beginning of twenty-nine *sūrah*s and whose meaning is considered by most to be known only to God; see 2:1c. Some allow that *yā* *sīn* could be an abbreviation meaning “O human being” (Q). In this interpretation, the *yā* is the vocative “O,” used in many Quranic verses, and the *sīn* is an abbreviation for *unsayn*, the diminutive of *insān* (“human being”). In this context, the diminutive “O little human being” is a term of endearment interpreted as God’s address to the Prophet Muhammad. Others say that *Yā Sīn* is a name given to the Prophet by God whose exact meaning is unknown (Q). For this reason it is sometimes used in the Islamic world as the name for a male. “Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib is reported to have said, “I heard the Messenger of God say, ‘Verily God has named me by seven names in the Quran: Muhammad [3:144; 33:40; 47:2; 48:29], Aḥmad [61:6], *Ṭā Hā* [20:1], *Yā Sīn* [36:1], *thou enwrapped* [*al-Muzzammil*; 73:1], *thou who art covered* [*al-Mudaththir*; 74:1], and *servant of God* [*ʿAbd Allāh*; 72:19]” (IA, Q). Other commentators take *Yā Sīn* to be a name of the Quran itself, while al-Qushayrī identifies it with the Day of the Covenant (*yawm al-mīthāq*), when God made a covenant with all the children of Adam (see 7:172).

2 *Ḥakīm*, here translated *Wise*, can also mean “determined” or “made firm” (*muhkam*), as in 11:1, where the Quran is described as a *Book whose signs have been determined* (*uhkimat*; Q). According to Ibn Kathīr, its being determined (*muhkam*) indicates that *falsehood comes not upon it from before it or from behind it* (41:42). *Ḥakīm* could also mean something that makes wise (*muhkim*), indicating that the Quran teaches the truth. According to Ibn Kathīr, the use of *ḥakīm* here alludes to the Quran as a revealed book. The Quran is also described as *wise* in 10:1; 31:2; 43:3–4.

3–4 These verses affirm the Prophet’s mission, thus supporting the interpretations that see *Yā Sīn* as a reference to the Prophet himself. For *straight path*, see 1:6c.

5 *Revelation* can be read as the object of an implied verb, meaning, “We revealed it as a revelation,” in which case it refers back to the *Wise Quran*, or it can be read in the nominative, meaning, “It is a revelation.” Most commentators say *revelation* in either reading refers to the Quran, although some say it refers to the Prophet (Q, R), in which case “it” in the elided phrase would be rendered “he.” Both interpretations are possible, as the Prophet is also said to be *sent down*, as in 65:10–11: *God has certainly sent down unto you a reminder: a Messenger reciting unto you the clear*



heedless. ⑦ The Word has indeed come due for most of them, for they do not believe. ⑧ Truly We have put shackles upon their necks, and they are up to their chins, such that they are forced up. ⑨ And We placed a barrier before them and

*signs of God.* The juxtaposition of *Mighty* and *Merciful* here and in other verses (esp. throughout Sūrah 26) is seen as an allusion to God being both just and merciful, vengeful toward those who oppose Him and merciful toward those who obey Him.

6 This verse is similar to 32:3, which states that the Quran was sent so that the Prophet might warn a people to whom no warner has come before. Regarding the absence of a previous Arabic revelation, 34:44 says of the Arabs, *We have not given them any books that they study, nor have We sent them a warner before.* Although the Arabs had been sent messengers before in the intervening generations from the time of Ishmael, who was both a prophet and the progenitor of the Arabs (as Isaac was of the Jews), the pure monotheism of Abraham had become lost, and from the point of view of the Arabs the religion of their fathers was pagan. Read in connection to the following verse and the context of the entire Quran, there is an ominous tone to this verse, for as other verses state, *Thy Lord never destroys towns until He sends a messenger to their mother city to recite unto them Our signs* (28:59), and *Never did We destroy a town save that it had warners* (26:208); see also 6:131; 10:13. Some propose that the verse should be read, “of that of which their fathers were warned.”

7 *The Word has indeed come due for most of them* translates *ḥaqqā al-qawlu ‘alā aktharihim*, which could also be translated, “the Word has indeed proved true against most of them.” The *Word* most likely refers to the *Word of punishment* (39:71; see also 22:18); it indicates that they will be in Hell, for as 40:6 states, *Likewise did the Word of thy Lord come due for those who disbelieve, that they are the inhabitants of the Fire.* This is because *they do not believe* in the warning referred to in v. 6, in the *Wise Quran* (v. 2), or that the Prophet Muhammad is *among the message bearers* (v. 3). The *Word* that comes due or proves true is seen by some as God’s threat in 32:13: *But the Word from Me comes due: “I shall fill Hell with jinn and men altogether!”* Similar threats occur in 11:119 and 38:84–5. The *Word* could also be a reference to the

Quran itself, for it is thought that when one turns away from revelation it proves one’s true nature. In this regard, a famous *ḥadīth* states, “The Quran is a proof, either for you or against you.”

8 The disbelievers’ hands are bound to the their necks with *shackles*, which translates *aghālāl*, specifically indicating iron shackles that bind the hands in cuffs that are attached to an iron ring around the neck. *They* is thus taken by most to indicate the hands that are bound to their necks (Q, Ṭs) and is seen as related to 17:29, *And let not thine hand be shackled to thy neck* (IK, Q, Ṭ), which is a warning against miserliness. The binding of their hands to their necks is taken by some to indicate their state on the Day of Resurrection (Ṭs) or in the Hereafter, as in 40:71: *They will be dragged, with shackles and chains around their necks* (Q). Others say it refers to the state of the idolaters in this life, meaning that those who turn away from the Prophet’s call are like those whose hands are shackled to their necks so that they cannot extend them toward what is good (IK, Ṭ, Ṭs). In this interpretation their chins being *forced up* alludes to their arrogance in the face of the truth (Q).

9 This verse is interpreted to mean, “We have placed a barrier between them (the disbelievers) and the truth” or “We have blinded them to the truth” (IK), in light of 10:96–97: *Truly those for whom the Word of thy Lord has come due will not believe, though every sign should come unto them, till they see the painful punishment.* Understood in this way, it means that they cannot benefit from guidance, no matter what the Prophet does. Thus God counsels the Prophet in v. 76, *Let not their speech grieve thee.* Some say the *barrier before them* refers to their being deluded in the life of this world and the *barrier behind them* refers to their denying the life of the Hereafter (Q). Others maintain that vv. 8–9 refer to a specific incident in which a leader from the tribe of Quraysh saw the Prophet praying and went to smash his head with a rock; as he moved his hand forward to cast the rock, his hand returned to his neck and the rock was stuck in it (Q, Ṭs). Then another man took the rock with the same purpose, but when he

a barrier behind them and veiled them, such that they see not. <sup>10</sup> It is the same for them whether thou warnest them or warnest them not; they do not believe.

<sup>11</sup> Thou only warnest whomsoever follows the Reminder and fears the Compassionate unseen. So give such a one glad tidings of forgiveness and a generous reward. <sup>12</sup> Truly We give life to the dead and record that which they have sent forth and that which they have left behind. And We have counted all things in

did so, he could hear the Prophet but not see him. When a third man went to smash the Prophet's head, he saw before him a tremendous camel that was about to swallow him (Q). These particular examples of the incident to which this verse may refer are not, however, taken to contravene the more general implications, but rather to be manifestations of particular forms of denial and disbelief represented by the acts described.

**10–11** Cf. 2:6. The last phrase of v. 10 could also be read, “they will not believe.” For similar verses where warnings and guidance are of no avail to disbelievers, see 7:193; 26:136; 63:6. These verses remind the Prophet that he cannot guide those whom God has not guided and should simply leave them to God: *Truly God leads astray whomsoever He will and guides whomsoever He will; so let not thy soul be expended in regrets over them. Truly God knows that which they do* (35:8). *The Reminder* is a reference to the Quran itself (IK, Q, R, Ṭ); for the Quran as *Reminder*, see 36:69c. *Fears the Compassionate unseen* (cf. 50:33) can be interpreted as a reference to worshipping God while God remains unseen or to worshipping God in seclusion (Q, Ṭs). *A noble reward* here means Paradise or *the Garden*. See also 67:12c.

**12** This verse follows upon the counsel to the Prophet to deliver the warning and leave the disbelievers to their own devices, since the price of their wrongdoing will come due upon the Resurrection. *We give life to the dead* can be seen as a reference to the Resurrection; to God's bringing the earth back to life, as in 57:17: *Know that God revives the earth after its death* (IK); to bringing people from idolatry to faith (Z); or to the revivification, through knowledge and truth, of hearts made dead through heedlessness and ignorance (Aj, IK). *That which they have sent forth* refers to

the deeds that will testify for or against them in the Hereafter; see 5:80; 75:13c; 82:5c. Here, *that which they have left behind* literally means “their footsteps” or “their traces.” It is said to refer to one of the tribes of Madinah, the Banū Salamah, who were settled far from the Prophet's mosque and desired to relocate closer to it. This verse was then revealed. So the Prophet said to them, “Your footprints are recorded [i.e., you receive reward for walking to the mosque]. Why then do you want to move?” (IK, Q, Ṭ, W). More broadly, it is taken as a reference to the traces of good deeds that one leaves behind (Aj, Ṭ). As a well-known *ḥadīth* states, “When the son of Adam dies, all his deeds come to an end except three: knowledge that is beneficial, a righteous child who prays for him, or ongoing charity that he leaves behind” (IK); see 75:13c. *And We have counted all things in a clear registry (imām)* is taken by some to allude to the inscription of all things from the beginning of time to its end on the *Preserved Tablet* (85:22; Aj, Ṭb, Ṭs), which is the *imām* (“leader”) of all other books (Aj) and which is said to comprise all of God's decrees (Ṭb, Ṭs); for the inscription of God's decrees, see 68:1c. Others say *imām* refers to the book or “registry” in which all human actions are recorded (Aj, IK, Q, Ṭs); see 17:71c; 18:49c. This is also one of the central verses cited by Shiite theologians as Quranic support for the Shiite understanding of Divinely ordained leadership in the form of the imamate after the death of the Prophet. In this vein al-Qummī relates a saying from ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib: “I, by God, am the *clear imām*; I clarify truth from falsehood. I inherited it from the Messenger of God” (Qm, Ṭb). Shiite sources also relate that the Prophet said regarding ‘Alī, “He is the Imam in whom God records the knowledge of all things” (Qm, Ṭb).

a clear registry. <sup>13</sup> And set forth for them as a parable the people of the town, when the message bearers came unto it. <sup>14</sup> When We sent two unto them, they denied them. So We strengthened them with a third, and they said, “Verily, we have been sent unto you!” <sup>15</sup> They said, “You are but human beings like us, and the Compassionate has not sent down anything. You are but lying.” <sup>16</sup> They said, “Our Lord knows. Verily, we have indeed been sent unto you!” <sup>17</sup> And naught is incumbent upon us save the clear proclamation.” <sup>18</sup> They said, “Truly we augur ill of you. If you cease not, we shall certainly stone you, and a painful punishment will certainly befall you from us.” <sup>19</sup> They said, “Your auguring ill is upon yourselves. Even if you are reminded [. . .]? Nay, you are a prodigal

**13–14** The Prophet is here commanded to provide the Quraysh with an example of the fate that befell those who treated previous *message bearers* as they were treating him. The first phrase of v. 13 could also be rendered, “Set forth for them a parable, the people of the town.” Most identify the town as Antioch (IK, Q, T, Ts), though this identification cannot be verified (IK). Most commentators view the *message bearers* (*mursalin*, rather than *rusul*, “messengers”) as apostles sent to the town by Jesus. In this interpretation, that God is said to have sent them indicates that Jesus was commanded by God to send them (Q, Ts). After the first two, whom some commentators identify as Jesus and Simon, were sent, the people of the town beat and imprisoned them (Q, T, Ts). Some say this punishment was ordered by the king (Aj), after which a third *message bearer*, whom some identify as Jonas, was sent.

According to another opinion, the *message bearers* are prophets (Aj, Ts) rather than apostles sent by a prophet. This interpretation seems more likely, as the Prophet Muhammad is referred to as a *message bearer* in v. 2 and in 2:252, and other prophets are referred to as *message bearers* in over a dozen verses. *We have been sent unto you* here and in v. 16 could also be rendered, “we are message bearers unto you.”

**15** In other passages, many communities reject prophets because they are human, claiming that if God had wanted to send a message, He would have chosen an angel as His message bearer or messenger. As 17:94 states, *And naught hindered men*

*from believing when guidance came unto them, save that they said, “Has God sent a human being as a messenger?”* (see also 6:8–9; 6:50; 11:12; 14:10; 23:33; 41:14; 64:6). In other verses, this same objection is attributed to those who opposed the Prophet Muhammad: *And they say, “What ails this Messenger, who eats food and walks in the markets? Why is there not an angel sent down unto him to be a warner with him?”* (25:7).

**16** The message bearers’ second statement of their mission is more emphatic than the first (v. 14), because it is a reaffirmation in the face of denial and rejection.

**17** Like the Prophet Muhammad, the message bearers are only instructed to deliver the message and to guide those who heed it; they are not responsible for those who deny it; see 36:10–11c. That the prophets are only responsible for delivering the message is emphasized in many passages; see e.g., 3:20; 5:92, 99; 13:40; 16:35, 82; 24:54; 29:18; 42:48; 64:12.

**18** This is the response of the disbelievers to the message bearers, meaning, “We see an ill omen or foretell a punishment that will befall you.”

**19** The response from the message bearers to the disbelievers is that the punishment the disbelievers foretell will befall them because of their disbelief. The ellipsis indicates a rhetorical elision that constitutes the object of the interrogative and serves as a rebuke, as if to say, “Do you augur ill and disbelieve, even when you have been reminded?” Cf. 17:13: *And [for] every man We have fastened his omen upon his neck, and We shall bring*

people!” (20) And from the outskirts of the city, a man came running. He said, “O my people! Follow the message bearers! (21) Follow those who ask not of you any reward and who are guided. (22) Why should I not worship Him who originated me, and unto Whom you will be returned? (23) Shall I take gods apart from Him? If the Compassionate desired harm for me, their intercession would avail me naught, nor would they save me. (24) Truly would I then be in manifest error. (25) Truly I believe in your Lord, so listen to me.” (26) It was said unto him,

*it forth for him on the Day of Resurrection; see also 7:131; 27:47. That the disbelievers’ auguring ill rebounds upon them indicates the “reflexive” nature of good and evil deeds, which is emphasized throughout the Quran. For example, if one spends in charity, one spends it for oneself, as in 2:272: Whatever good you spend, it is for yourselves, when you spend only seeking the Face of God. Conversely, whosoever is miserly is only miserly unto himself (47:38); if one tries to deceive, one only deceives oneself (2:9); if one tries to lead astray, one only goes astray (3:69; 4:113); and if some devise a plot against God and His Messenger, God will devise a plot against them (52:42); see 4:111c. For the meaning of prodigal people, see 10:12c.*

20 The man in this verse is usually identified by the name Ḥabīb al-Najjār. Some claim that he worshipped God in seclusion, and when the news of the message bearers came, he proclaimed his faith (Aj). Others attribute a saying to the Prophet: “The foremost among the people are three who did not disbelieve in God for the blinking of an eye: ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, the companion of Yā Sin, and the believer among the people of Pharaoh [see 40:28–29]. They are the truthful (ṣiddiq)” (Sy, Th, Ṭs). Another interpretation says that Ḥabīb al-Najjār followed the first two message bearers after they healed his son (Aj, Q).

21 A mark of prophethood is to ask for nothing from the people, except that they follow the message the prophets are sent to deliver. As Noah says, *And if you turn your backs, I have not asked of you any reward. My reward lies only with God, and I am commanded to be among those who submit* (10:72). Thus the Prophet Muhammad is commanded in 6:90; 38:86; and 42:23, *Say, “I ask not of you any reward for it”* (see also 26:109, 127, 145, 164, 180).

22 *Originated me* translates *ṣaṭarānī*, which derives from the same root as *ṣiṭrah*, or *primordial nature*, alluded to in 30:30: *Set thy face to religion as a ḥanīf, in the primordial nature from God upon which He originated mankind—there is no altering the creation of God; that is the upright religion, but most of mankind know not.* Read in light of 30:30 and 51:56, *And I did not create jinn and mankind, save to worship Me*, this verse implies that the worship of God is central to the primordial nature with which human beings were created.

23 The question means, “Shall I take gods other than God, worship them, and leave the worship of the One Who is worthy of worship?” (Sh) The Quran indicates that angels and prophets will be able to intercede on the Day of Judgment, but that *intercession* is entirely by the Will of God. As 20:109 states, *On that Day intercession will be of no benefit, save [that of] those whom the Compassionate has granted leave and with whose word He is content.* Thus 2:255 asks rhetorically, *Who is there who may intercede with Him save by His leave?* For intercession, see 2:48c; 2:255c.

24 *Manifest error* (*dalāl mubīn*) is employed throughout the Quran to indicate one whose wrongdoing makes him stray from the path of truth (Ṭ). It can also be understood to mean “error that makes manifest” or “makes clear.” It is also read by some as *dalāl mubayyan* (Bd), which would then indicate “error that has been made manifest” or “made clear.”

25 According to some, *so listen to me* is a call to the people to follow God and His message bearers; others say it is a call to the message bearers, asking them to bear witness for the man before God (IK).

26 Some say that after his declaration to the people (v. 25), the man was stoned and killed (Aj, IK, Ṭs). Then he was told by God, or by the

“Enter the Garden!” He said, “Would that my people knew <sup>27</sup> how my Lord forgave me and placed me among the honored.” <sup>28</sup> And after him We did not send down a host from Heaven against his people, nor did We used to send down. <sup>29</sup> It was but a single cry. Then, behold, they were extinguished. <sup>30</sup> Alas for the servants! Never did a messenger come unto them, but that they mocked him. <sup>31</sup> Have they not considered how many generations before them We destroyed, such that they return not unto them? <sup>32</sup> Each of them shall be a group arraigned before Us. <sup>33</sup> A sign unto them is the dead earth: We revive it and bring forth grain therefrom, that they may eat thereof. <sup>34</sup> And We place gar-

angels and the righteous, *Enter the Garden!* (Aj, R). Others maintain that God took him alive to heaven.

<sup>27</sup> This verse could also mean “for what my Lord forgave me and that He placed me among the honored” (Ts), which may imply the bad deeds that were forgiven or the good deed(s) for which God forgave him his sins. According to Qatādah (d. 117/726), one of the foremost commentators from the third generation of Muslim scholars, the people began to stone him while he was praying for God to guide them, and as they continued to stone him, he continued to pray for them, even while suffering a gruesome death at their hands (IK).

<sup>28</sup> This verse is taken by many as a reference to the punishment that God inflicted upon his people for rejecting the *message bearers* and for killing (or seeking to kill) Ḥabīb al-Najjār, in which case it indicates that God wiped them out with a *single cry* rather than sending angels against them (IK, Q). Others say that a *host from Heaven* refers to the angels of revelation (Ts), meaning that God did not send another revelation after having sent *the message bearers*. The second interpretation is more consistent with this story in its function as a warning to the Quraysh, for it implies that accepting the revelation sent to the Prophet Muhammad is their only opportunity and they will not receive another. The last phrase could also be rendered “nor what We used to send down” (Ka, Ts).

<sup>29</sup> This verse indicates that the destruction for having disbelieved was instant.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. 15:11. *Alas for the servants!* is taken by most to indicate amazement at the extreme

injustice disbelievers do to themselves and the punishment they will suffer (IK, Q). Others take *servants* as a reference to the prophets, in which case the verse expresses God’s lament for the hardships they endure when mocked by disbelievers (Q, Ts).

<sup>31</sup> *They* and *them* can be read as a reference to the former peoples who were destroyed, to the inhabitants of Makkah who deny the prophecy of the Prophet Muhammad, or to both.

<sup>32</sup> This verse and v. 53 indicate that all human beings, believers and disbelievers alike, will be *arraigned* on the Day of Judgment. But other verses indicate that only the disbelievers will be *arraigned unto the punishment* (30:16; 34:38). It appears that these verses indicate two arraignments: the first is the gathering of all human beings referred to here and in v. 53; the second, which comes after the gathering of all humans, is the Reckoning the disbelievers will endure before they are cast into Hell.

<sup>33–34</sup> These verses mark the beginning of what can be seen as the second section of the *sūrah*. They employ a common Qurānic rhetorical device by which the wonders of creation are cited as signs of God’s Oneness, Perfection, Wisdom, and Omnipotence; see 3:190–91c; 41:53c. The phrase *a sign unto them* can have three meanings: it is something to be contemplated; it is a blessing upon human beings; or it is a warning to human beings (Q). Here God’s ability to revive the earth is cited as evidence of His ability to resurrect (cf. 7:57; 16:65; 22:5; 29:63; 30:19, 24, 50; 35:9; 41:31, 39; 43:11; 45:5; 50:9–11). As in v. 12, it can also be seen as an allusion to the revivification, through



dens of date palms and grapevines therein and make springs flow forth, <sup>35</sup> that they may eat of its fruit and of that which their hands have worked. Will they not then give thanks? <sup>36</sup> Glory be unto Him, Who has created the pairs, all of them, from what the earth makes grow, and from themselves, and from what they know not. <sup>37</sup> And a sign unto them is the night: We strip the day therefrom, and behold, they are in darkness. <sup>38</sup> And the sun runs to a dwelling

faith and knowledge, of a heart that has been hardened. *Gardens of date palms and grapevines* (cf. 2:266; 23:19) are specified because they were thought by Arabs to be the best of fruits; they can thus be seen as an allusion to all forms of plant life by which people are nourished (Q).

<sup>35</sup> *Its fruit* refers to the fruit produced by plants through the water from the springs (Q). Or it could be rendered “His fruit,” meaning the fruit that God has produced (Aj, IK). As translated, the verse can be read as a positive affirmation of eating the fruits of one’s own labor, for as a *ḥadīth* says, “No one eats any food that is better than that from the work of his own hand.” *That which their hands have worked* could also be rendered “though their hands did not make it” (IK, Q, R, T), a reference to the fact that all fruits are ultimately produced by God (cf. 27:60; 56:64). People’s lack of gratitude is a common Quranic theme, as in 2:243: *Truly God is Possessed of Bounty for mankind, but most of mankind do not give thanks* (cf. 10:60; 12:38; 22:66; 25:50; 40:61).

<sup>36</sup> *Glory be* indicates both God’s being beyond all that the idolaters associate with Him and amazement at what they say. *Pairs* translates *azwāj*, which can also mean “kinds” in the sense of species, thus indicating the many different kinds of things that God has created (Q). It can also be seen as a reference to the creation of all things in pairs, as in 51:49: *And of all things We created pairs, that haply you may remember* (IK). *From themselves* could also mean “from their souls,” in which case it can be seen as a reference to the male and female, as in 53:45, *And that He creates the two (zawjayn)—male and female*, which are said to be *mates (azwāj)* created from a single soul (4:1; 6:98; 7:189; 39:6). *From what they know not* can be seen as an allusion to the unseen realm or to the many things in the created world that humans have not

experienced, as in 16:8: *And He creates that which you know not*.

<sup>37</sup> The alteration of night and day are cited throughout the Quran as a sign of God’s Power and Perfection, as are the sun and the moon. As 39:5 says, *He rolls the night up into the day and rolls the day up into the night, and He made the sun and the moon subservient, each running for a term appointed*. For the relationship between night and day, see 10:6c; 17:12c. *Strip* translates *naslakha*, which originally means to remove the skin from an animal.

<sup>38</sup> It is reported that a Companion of the Prophet, Abū Dharr, said, “The Prophet asked me at sunset, ‘Do you know where the sun goes [when it sets]?’ I replied, ‘God and His Messenger know best.’ He said, ‘It travels till it prostrates itself underneath the Throne and asks permission to rise again, and it is permitted. Then it is about to prostrate itself, but its prostration will not be accepted, and it will ask permission to go on its course, but it will not be permitted and will instead be ordered to return whence it has come, and so it will rise in the west’” (IK). In light of this account, the verse alludes to the sun’s final *dwelling place* on the Day of Judgment. Others see the verse as a reference to the sun following its winter and summer orbits until each solstice, when it reaches its northernmost or southernmost extreme before reversing direction (IK). *Dwelling place* then indicates the solstice. In this interpretation it bears a close resemblance to the word “solstice,” which derives from the Latin *solstitium*, meaning “sun-stopping.” Another reading, “And the sun runs; it has no dwelling place (*lā mustaqarra lahā*),” was reportedly preferred by some of the Prophet’s Companions, such as the famous Quran scholars Ibn Mas‘ūd and Ibn ‘Abbās (IK, T, Ts).

place of its own. That is the decree of the Mighty, the Knowing. <sup>39</sup> And for the moon, We have decreed mansions, till it returns like an old palm stalk. <sup>40</sup> It befits not the sun to overtake the moon, nor the night to outstrip the day. Each glides in an orbit. <sup>41</sup> And a sign unto them is that We carried their progeny in the full-laden ark. <sup>42</sup> And We created for them the like thereof upon which they ride. <sup>43</sup> And if We will, We drown them, such that they would have none to call upon and would not be saved, <sup>44</sup> save as a mercy from Us and an enjoyment for a while. <sup>45</sup> And when it is said unto them, “Be mindful of that

<sup>39</sup> This verse is a reference to the waxing and waning of the moon through the twenty-eight stages (*manāzil*) of a single lunar month (Q). *Like an old palm stalk* is a reference to the appearance of what remains from a date cluster after its fruit has been removed and it has withered, when it resembles the thin crescent moon in shape, width, and color (Q, Z).

<sup>40</sup> Cf. 21:33. The sun, moon, and other celestial bodies move in separate measurable orbits that are essential for navigating space and calculating time; without them human beings would lose their bearings and not be able to continue their lives on earth; more specifically, they would not be able to perform the religious rites required of them. In this way they can be seen as manifestations of God’s Guidance and Mercy. As 10:5 states, *He it is Who made the sun a radiance, and the moon a light, and determined for it stations, that you might know the number of years and the reckoning [of time]* (see also 17:12). In 2:189 the stages of the moon are specifically linked to performing the pilgrimage: *They ask thee about the new moons. Say, “They are markers of time for mankind and for the hajj.”* In this way, the sun and the moon serve humanity in this life, though on the Day of Judgment *the sun and the moon are brought together* (75:9).

<sup>41</sup> According to most, this verse refers to Noah’s ark, by which God preserved one generation of humanity and thereby all of humanity (IK, Q, T, Ts, Z). Others take it as a reference to past generations being carried in the wombs of women, which are here likened to the *full-laden ark* (Q, Z).

<sup>42</sup> This verse is taken by many as a reference to other ships that are similar to Noah’s ark (IK,

Q, T, Ts, Z), though many understand it as a reference to camels, which were known as “the ships of the desert” (IK, Q, T, Ts, Z). Others say that it is a reference to all beasts of burden (Q, T, Ts).

<sup>43</sup> This verse means that God could drown people at any moment (IK). In this sense it is a reminder that one’s life is always in God’s Hands, as in other passages that speak of those who remember God when they are on the verge of drowning, yet forget Him when danger is no longer imminent; see 10:22–23; 17:66–67. They *would have none to call upon* for help or protection. This phrase could also be rendered “None would call upon them,” indicating that they are completely forgotten. This latter interpretation is supported by several verses that speak of the disbelievers being forgotten (e.g., 7:51; 9:67; 20:126; 32:14; 45:34; 59:19).

<sup>44</sup> *For a while* indicates that God will postpone the disbelievers’ punishment, thus giving them time until the moment of their death to repent or to prove their true nature, as in 3:178: *And let not those who disbelieve suppose that the respite We grant them is good for them. We only grant them respite that they may increase in sin, and theirs shall be a humiliating punishment.* In this context, *enjoyment for a while* indicates the ephemeral delights of this world, which are *naught but the enjoyment of delusion* (3:185; 57:20) and stand in stark contrast to the rewards of the next life (see 3:14; 4:77; 9:38; 13:26; 20:131; 28:60; 40:39; 42:36).

<sup>45</sup> *That which is before you* can be taken as a reference to the Hereafter, which is to come and for which one must work, and *that which is behind you* as a reference to this world, by which



which is before you and of that which is behind you, that haply you may receive mercy.” <sup>46</sup> Never did a sign from among the signs of their Lord come unto them but that they turned away from it. <sup>47</sup> And when it is said unto them, “Spend of that wherewith God has provided you,” those who disbelieve say to those who believe, “Are we to feed those whom, if God willed, He would feed? You are in naught but manifest error.” <sup>48</sup> And they say, “When will this promise come to pass, if you are truthful?” <sup>49</sup> They await but a single cry that will

one should not be deluded (Q, Ts). According to others, the first phrase refers to what is apparent, and the second to what is hidden (Q), as in 34:9: *Have they not considered that which is before them and that which is behind them of the sky and earth? If We will, We cause the earth to engulf them or fragments from the sky to fall upon them. Truly in that is a sign for every penitent servant.* According to Mujāhid and Ibn ʿAbbās, the former refers to the sins one has committed (Q, IK), and the latter to the sins one will commit (Q), meaning that one should be mindful of God so as to avoid sin in the future and repent for the sins of the past (Ts). “They turn away from it” could be placed at the end of the verse as an implied response to the conditional phrase *when is it said unto them* (Q, Ts).

<sup>46</sup> Cf. 6:4. This verse can be taken as a reference to the signs mentioned in the preceding verses, to the whole of the created order, to the whole of revelation, or to all three, as all are said to be *signs for those who possess intellect* (3:190). Thus 18:57 says, *And who does greater wrong than one who has been reminded of the signs of his Lord, then turns away from them and forgets that which his hands have sent forth? Surely We have placed coverings over their hearts, such that they understand not, and in their ears a deafness. Even if thou callest them to guidance, they will never be rightly guided* (see also 32:22). It is not that these people cannot see the signs, but that God veils them due to their arrogance and disbelief; as in 7:146: *I shall turn away from My signs those who wax arrogant upon the earth without right. Even if they were to see every sign, they would not believe in them.*

<sup>47</sup> Although there are several different accounts identifying the subject of this verse, they all agree that it responds to those who scoffed at the injunction to *spend in the way of God*—to feed the poor—found throughout the Qurān. It

is said that some unbelievers among the Quraysh said to Abū Bakr, who used to feed the destitute among the Muslims from his own wealth, “O Abū Bakr, do you claim that God is able to feed these people?” He replied, “Yes.” To which they replied, “So why is it that he does not feed them?” He said, “Some people are tried with poverty, others with wealth. The poor are commanded to be patient, and the wealthy are commanded to give.” So they replied, “O Abū Bakr, surely you are in error. Do you claim that God is able to feed these people, yet He does not feed them, then you feed them?” Then this verse was revealed, as were 92:5–6 (Q).

<sup>48</sup> Cf. 10:48; 21:38; 27:71; 34:29; 67:25. The disbelievers are said to have mocked the Prophet for not knowing exactly when the Hour and the Day of Resurrection, about which he warned them, would come to pass, for they expected a prophet to be able to see the future. In response to this expectation, 7:187 states: *They question thee about the Hour, when it will set in. Say, “Knowledge thereof lies only with my Lord. None save He shall manifest it at its proper time. Heavy shall it weigh upon the heavens and the earth. It shall not come upon you but suddenly.” They question thee as if thou knew it well. Say, “Knowledge thereof lies only with God, but most of mankind know not.”* According to some, the disbelievers referred to the Resurrection as *this promise*, because they thought they would be the ones to be rewarded with good. Thus Ibn Kathīr glosses this verse with 42:18: *Those who believe not in it would seek to hasten it.*

<sup>49</sup> A single cry refers to the first blast of Seraphiel’s trumpet (see 39:68c), which will level all that is on the earth. It will come while they are oblivious to it, disputing, bargaining, eating and drinking, and engaging in other affairs of the world.

seize them while they dispute among themselves, <sup>50</sup> and then they can make no bequest, nor return to their people. <sup>51</sup> And the trumpet will be blown. Then, behold, they will rush forth from their graves unto their Lord. <sup>52</sup> They will say, “Oh, woe unto us! Who has raised us from our place of sleep?” “This is that which the Compassionate did promise; and the message bearers spoke true.” <sup>53</sup> It shall be but a single cry. Then, behold, they will all be arraigned before Us! <sup>54</sup> This day no soul will be wronged in any way, and you will not be recompensed save for that which you used to do. <sup>55</sup> Truly the inhabitants of the Garden on that Day will be busy rejoicing, <sup>56</sup> they and their spouses reclining upon couches in the shade. <sup>57</sup> Therein they have fruit and whatsoever they

<sup>50</sup> The Hour will come upon people in an instant, so that they cannot attend to any affairs of this world, thus indicating that one should be ready for death at every moment. *Make no bequest* could also mean “Do not exhort or enjoin” or “Give no advice,” which would then imply that there must be no delay in following the command to *exhort one another to truth, and exhort one another to patience* (103:3).

<sup>51</sup> The second blast from Seraphiel’s trumpet will herald the Resurrection. Between the two blasts there is said to be an interval of forty years (Āl, IK, Q, T); see also 70:43. For the relation between the two cries, see 39:68–70.

<sup>52</sup> In an alternate reading, *Oh, woe unto us! Who has raised us* (*waylun lanā man ba’athanā*) is understood to mean, “Oh, woe unto us for our having been raised” (*waylun lanā min ba’thinā*; Āl, Q). *From our place of sleep* could also be read “from our sleep” (Āl). The last sentence of the verse is an answer to the question posed by the unbelievers in v. 48, as if to say that it does not matter when the promise will come to pass, only that people must be prepared for it. It can be seen as a continuation of what the disbelievers say to themselves, or as words of the angels addressed to them (IK).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. 79:13–14; that it is *but a single cry* is said to imply that *the matter of the Hour is as the blinking of an eye, or nearer still* (16:77). For *arraigned*, see 36:32c.

<sup>54</sup> This verse does not mean that none shall be punished; rather, it indicates that the punishment the disbelievers receive is because they have

wronged themselves by having disbelieved and turned away from God’s signs. This idea is mentioned throughout the Quran, as in 3:117: *God wrongs them not, but themselves do they wrong*; and 10:44: *Truly God does not wrong human beings in the least, but rather human beings wrong themselves*. In this respect even those who receive the worst of punishments are not wronged in the sense of having been treated unjustly; rather, *Judgment will be made between them in truth, and they shall not be wronged* (39:69); see also 45:22; 46:19.

<sup>55</sup> This verse implies that the *inhabitants of the Garden* are busy with the delights of Paradise and spiritual realities (IK, Q) rather than preoccupied by the concerns of this world. According to some, those in different levels of Paradise are occupied with different delights (Q), the highest of which are absorbed in the vision of God (R).

<sup>56</sup> Cf. 43:70. Those in Paradise are *reclining upon couches*, indicating that they are content and at peace (R on 18:31; 55:54). Some also view the couches as thrones, indicating that they have attained a high rank. Believers are to be rewarded with *spouses made pure* (2:25; 3:15; 4:57), which can be understood as an allusion to spiritual beings particular to Paradise, spouses of this world who have also attained to Paradise, or both. For the connotations of the Quranic use of *shade*, see 56:30c.

<sup>57</sup> According to several *ahādīth*, the fruits of Paradise are far superior to those of this world. There are several accounts in which the Prophet is said to have stretched forth his hand as if

call for. <sup>58</sup> “Peace!” a word from a Lord most Merciful. <sup>59</sup> Stand apart this Day, O guilty ones! <sup>60</sup> Did I not enjoin upon you, O Children of Adam, that you not worship Satan—truly he is a manifest enemy unto you— <sup>61</sup> and that you worship Me? This is a straight path. <sup>62</sup> For indeed he has led many among you astray. Did you not understand? <sup>63</sup> This is the Hell that you were promised. <sup>64</sup> Burn therein today for having disbelieved! <sup>65</sup> On that Day We shall seal their mouths. Their hands will speak to Us, and their feet will bear witness

reaching for something and, when asked about it, responded, “I was shown the Garden and wanted to have a bunch of fruit from it. Had I taken it, you would have eaten from it as long as the world remains.” The inhabitants of Paradise will receive *whatsoever they call for* (cf. 41:31; 44:55), will, or desire (see 16:31; 25:16; 39:34; 41:31; 42:22; 43:71; 50:35; 52:22; 56:20–24; 77:41–44), whereas for the disbelievers a *barrier is set between them and that which they desire* (34:54).

<sup>58</sup> According to a saying attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās, “God Himself is peace upon the people of the Garden” (IK), perhaps referring to Peace (*al-Salām*) as one of the Names of God. This is similar to 33:44: *Their greeting on the day they meet Him will be “Peace”* (IK). According to a *ḥadīth*, “While the people of the Garden are in their bliss, a light shines upon them. Then they lift their heads, and it is God beholding them from above. Then He says, ‘Peace be upon you, O people of the Garden.’ And that is [the meaning of] His saying, ‘Peace!’ a word from a Lord most Merciful. So He looks at them and they look at Him, and they are not distracted by anything from that bliss so long as they are looking upon Him, until He is unveiled to them and His Light and His Blessing remain upon them in their abodes” (IK, Q).

<sup>59</sup> This verse is an allusion to the separation of believers and disbelievers on the Day of Judgment, which because of this separation is also referred to as *the Day of Division* (37:21; 44:40; 77:13–14, 38; 78:17; see also 10:28; 30:14).

<sup>60–61</sup> *Enjoin* translates *a‘had*, which is from the same root as *ahd*, meaning “vow,” “pact,” or “covenant.” In this sense it relates to the covenant that all human beings made with God before coming into this world, for in acknowledging that God is their Lord, they acknowledge that only He is worthy of worship; see 7:172c and the

essay “The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions.” For references to Satan as a *manifest enemy*, also see 2:168; 2:208; 6:142; 7:22; 12:5; 17:53; 28:15; 43:62. For *straight path*, see 1:6c.

<sup>62</sup> This verse asks, “Did you not understand the fundamental difference between worshipping God and worshipping Satan?” (IK).

<sup>63–64</sup> These verses essentially say, “This is the Fire the prophets warned you about, but you denied, so *taste the punishment of the Fire that you used to deny!*” (32:20; 34:42).

<sup>65</sup> On the Day of Judgment people will no longer be able to make excuses and hide their sins with lies and duplicity. *Hands* and *feet* are also spoken of in 24:24 as testifying on the Day of Judgment, but there tongues are mentioned as well. According to 41:20, *their ears, their eyes, and their skins will bear witness against them for that which they used to do*. For a more extensive account of the manner in which one’s members and faculties bear witness against one’s soul, see 41:20–23. A famous *ḥadīth* reported by Anas ibn Mālik (d. ca. 91/709), who served the Prophet for many years, says, “We were with the Messenger of God when he laughed and said, ‘Do you know at what I am laughing?’ We replied, ‘God and His Messenger know best.’ He said, ‘At what a servant says to his Lord. He says, “O Lord will you not protect me from injustice (*ẓulm*)?”’ He replies, “But of course.” He says, “I will not accept any witness against myself but myself.” God replies, “Today your soul suffices as a witness against you, as do the noble scribes [i.e., the angels who have recorded your deeds; see 80:15–16c].” Then his mouth will be sealed and it will be said unto his limbs, “Speak!” So they will speak of his deeds. Then he will be permitted to speak and will say [to his limbs], “Away with you! Be doomed! It was on your behalf that I contended”” (IK, Q).

to that which they used to earn. <sup>66</sup> And had We willed, We would have blotted out their eyes. Then they would race to the path, yet how would they see? <sup>67</sup> And had We willed, We would have transformed them in their places. Then they could neither advance nor go back. <sup>68</sup> And whomsoever We give long life, We cause him to regress in creation. Do they not understand? <sup>69</sup> And We have not taught him poetry, nor would it befit him. It is but a reminder and a clear Quran, <sup>70</sup> to warn whomsoever is alive, and so that the Word may come due for the disbelievers. <sup>71</sup> Have they not considered that among that which Our Hands have wrought We created cattle for them, and that they are their masters, <sup>72</sup> and that We have subdued these for them, such that some are a mount for them and of some they eat? <sup>73</sup> And they have benefits and drinks therein.

<sup>66</sup> *Blotted out their eyes* means God will make them blind to guidance and the straight path (Q, T); cf. 4:47.

<sup>67</sup> *In their places* could also mean “in their dwellings.” In either reading it indicates that no matter where they may be, God can alter people’s state instantly or destroy them if He wills. This is seen by some as an allusion to God punishing disbelievers by transforming them into animals such as monkeys and pigs (Ts). See also 4:47c.

<sup>68</sup> *We cause him to regress in creation* refers to physical and mental decline in old age. Here it is meant as an argument, as if to say, “Does not the One who has power to do this have the power to resurrect you?” This is similar to 30:54: *God is He Who created you from weakness, then ordained strength after weakness, then ordained weakness and old age after strength*. See also 22:5, in which all of the stages of earthly life from conception to old age are cited as signs of God’s Power.

<sup>69</sup> This verse resumes the discussion of the nature of revelation from the beginning of the *sūrah*. As in 26:224–27, it alludes to those who accused the Prophet of being merely a poet. According to several accounts, the Prophet did not have any facility with *poetry*, either its rhyme or meter (IK, Q). Regarding the accusations that the Prophet had himself authored the Quran, 29:48 replies, *And thou didst not recite before this any Book, nor didst thou write it with thy right hand, for then those who make false claims would have doubted*. That the Quran is *but a reminder* is

repeated in several verses (6:69, 90; 12:104; 38:87; 68:52; 74:31; 81:27). To remind is the function of all revelation; hence the Torah is called a *Reminder* (40:54) and the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) are referred to as *the people of the Reminder* (16:43; 21:7). In this vein, the Quran is presented as a continuation of the previous Reminders that clarifies what humans may have forgotten from them. Thus 16:44 addresses the Prophet Muhammad: *And We have sent down the Reminder unto thee that thou mightest clarify for mankind that which has been sent down unto them, that haply they may reflect*.

<sup>70</sup> From one perspective, *to warn whomsoever is alive* indicates all of humanity, as in 6:19: *And this Quran has been revealed unto me, that thereby I may warn you and whomsoever it may reach* (IK). From another perspective, it refers to those whose hearts are alive (Q) and thus able to hear the warning and *soften unto the remembrance of God* (39:23). For the meaning of the Word coming due, see 36:7c.

<sup>71–73</sup> God created Adam as a *vicegerent upon the earth* (2:30) and has also appointed human beings as *vicegerents upon the earth* (6:165; 35:39); humanity is thus told, *Hast thou not considered that God has made whatsoever is in the earth subservient unto you?* (22:65). But this vicegerency requires that a human being remain a servant of God (‘*abd Allāh*), recognizing that all these benefits are from *that which God’s Hands have wrought*, and thus be thankful. For *vicegerent*, see 2:30c; 6:165c.

Will they not then give thanks? 74 Yet they have taken gods other than God, that perhaps they might be helped. 75 They cannot help them, though they be a host made ready for them. 76 So let not their speech grieve thee. Truly We know what they hide and what they disclose. 77 Has not man seen that We created him from a drop, and behold, he is a manifest adversary. 78 And he has set forth for Us a parable and forgotten his own creation, saying, "Who revives these bones, decayed as they are?" 79 Say, "He will revive them Who brought

This passage is one of several to invoke the benefits of cattle—their usefulness for riding and transporting goods, for providing clothing and furnishings, food and drink, and even their beauty—as signs of God's beneficence toward human beings; see 6:142; 16:5, 66, 79; 23:21–22; 40:79; 43:12–13. For v. 73, cf. 16:66; 23:21. *Drinks* could also mean "drinking places."

74 This verse refers not only to polytheism and idolatry, but also to the fact that in not giving thanks to God and failing to acknowledge that He is the Creator and Sustainer of all things, human beings arrogate powers to themselves and others that have in fact only been lent to them by God. In a *ḥadīth* the Prophet warns against the subtler forms of idolatry: "The most frightening thing that I fear for my community is associating others with God. I do not mean that they will worship the sun, the moon, or idols. I mean that they will perform works for other than God with a hidden desire."

75 *Though they be a host made ready for them* may be seen as a reference to the idolaters who are ready to fight on behalf of their gods, though their gods will not be able to fight for them (T). Some take it as a reference to the gods they worship becoming a host who will testify against them at the Reckoning (IK, Q, T), but this interpretation is problematic, because it implies that such gods are real beings. The verse also implies that the hidden desires for which deeds are performed are a host of difficulties that continue to create obstacles in this life until one achieves full sincerity and strives only for God.

76 On the one hand, this verse counsels the Prophet that he should not be grieved by the disbelievers' accusations or their plotting against him

in secret, since God will protect him in this world and they will receive the proper punishment for their deeds, either in this life or the next. On the other hand, it indicates that the Prophet must not be concerned with their continuing disbelief, for once he has warned them, he has fulfilled his responsibilities (see 3:176; 5:41, 68; 6:33; 10:65; 15:88; 16:127; 18:6; 26:3; 27:70; 31:23; 35:8). As 2:272 says in addressing the Prophet, *Thou art not tasked with their guidance, but God guides whomsoever He will* (also see 28:56).

77 Cf. 16:4; the creation of the human being from a drop (cf. 18:37; 22:5; 35:11; 40:67; 53:46; 75:37; 76:2; 80:19), meaning sperm or as phrased elsewhere *a draught of a base fluid* (32:8; cf. 77:20), is cited in several verses as testimony to God's ability to resurrect human beings in the Hereafter; see commentary on 32:7–11. For the phases of gestation, see also 22:5; 23:14. An argument implied here and elsewhere is that in not recognizing the nature of one's own creation and that to which it bears witness, one is a *manifest adversary* to oneself.

78–79 These verses express a common objection to the Quranic understanding of bodily resurrection (cf. 13:5; 17:49, 98; 23:35, 82–83; 27:67; 37:16–17, 53; 50:3; 56:47–48; 79:11). Regarding this particular instance, it is reported that a man by the name of Abī ibn Khalaf brought some withered bones to the Prophet and crushed them into pieces saying, "Do you think that God can revive these [bones] after they have decayed and become rot?" The Prophet answered, "Yes, indeed! And He will also throw you into the Fire." Then these verses were revealed (IK, JJ, Q, W). *And forgotten his own creation* could also be rendered "having forgotten his own creation." For a passage similar to v. 79, see 17:51.

them forth the first time, and He knows every creation, <sup>(80)</sup> Who made for you fire from the green tree, and, behold, you kindle from it.” <sup>(81)</sup> Is not He Who created the heavens and the earth able to create the like thereof? Yea, indeed, He is the knowing Creator. <sup>(82)</sup> His Command when He desires a thing is only to say to it, “Be!” and it is. <sup>(83)</sup> So glory be to Him in Whose Hand lies the dominion of all things, and unto Whom you shall be returned.

<sup>80</sup> Just as God makes fire emerge from wood that is wet and moist, or that had been wet and moist, so too can He make life emerge from bones that are dead and decayed (Q). According to Ibn ‘Abbās, this refers to the Markh and ‘Afār trees that grow in the Hijaz, in western Arabia; rubbing two green branches from these trees together is known to produce fire (IK).

<sup>81</sup> Several passages maintain that the first creation itself is clear evidence of God’s ability to re-create and to resurrect: *He created you the first time and unto Him shall you be returned* (41:21); *As We began the first creation, so shall We bring it back—a promise binding upon Us. Surely We shall do it* (21:104); see also 50:1; 79:27.

<sup>82</sup> This verse is one of the most frequently quoted verses of the Quran. *He says to it, “Be!” and it is* (2:117; 3:47; 6:73; 16:40; 19:35; 40:68) points to the fact that God’s creative act is dependent upon no other and is *like the blinking of an eye* (54:50); see 2:117c. *Be! and it is* (*kun fa-yakūn*) has become an aphorism in Arabic and other Islamic languages that is used often in daily discourse.

<sup>83</sup> *Glory be* indicates both God’s being beyond all that the idolaters associate with Him and amazement at what they say. *Dominion* translates

*malakūt*, which is closely related to *mulk*, meaning *sovereignty* and found in the recurring phrase *Unto God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth* (e.g., 2:107; 3:189; 5:17, 18, 40, 120; 9:116). Both words derive from the same root, *m-l-k*, which in verbal form means “to possess,” “to control,” “to rule,” or “to reign.” According to some, *malakūt* and *mulk* have the same meaning (IK). According to others, *malakūt* refers to God’s Lordship over the unseen realm, and *mulk* refers to His Lordship over the visible world. In some Islamic cosmologies, this world is designated by *mulk*, *malakūt* is understood as the level of being above this world, and above that lies the archangelic realm, which designated by *jabarūt*. From one perspective this verse is an answer to the question posed in 23:88: *Who is it in Whose Hand lies the dominion of everything, who protects but is not protected against, if you know?* The phrase *shall be returned* could also be rendered “are being returned,” which would emphasize the ongoing process of return to God experienced by all beings. The fact that both renderings are in the passive voice indicates that humans have no choice regarding whether they return or not.