## Sura 38- Ṣād

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## Introduction

Sura 38 is one of 29 suras that begin with isolated letters or *muqaṭṭaʿāt \_and is one of four that are named after those letters (along with Ṭāʾ-Hāʾ (20), [\_Yāʾ-Sīn* (36)](/quran/week-4-suras-36-67-32/sura-36.md), and *Qāf* (50)). This sura centers around a commentary on certain Biblical stories, particularly the story of David (*cf.* II Samuel) and his son Solomon as well as Noah and Job.

The first part of the sura (vv. 1-11) contains a standard admonition to humble oneself before the Creator. This is a recurring theme throughout the Qur’an, and some might argue the core of it’s message: do not succumb to false pride, do not suffer the delusion that you are self-sufficient, you are not. Show gratitude for that which made you and respect for those who have come to remind you of this message.

The middle part of this sura (vv. 12-64) can be divided into two sections. The first is a commentary on various Biblical stories. It begins with Noah (12-16) but then moves into the story of David, culminating in this pearl in verse 26:

O David! Behold! We have made you a deputy on earth,  
So judge between people with justice,  
And do not succumb to your desires,  
Lest it may lead you astray from the right path.  
Indeed those who stray from the path of Allah,  
For them there is an intense punishment  
In that they forgot the Day of Reckoning.[[1]](#footnote-24)

Asma Barlas[[2]](#footnote-26) has this to say about this verse:

Even a prophet and a king like David is not infallible inasmuch as he is capable of “following the lusts” of his heart, and even the vice-regency of a prophet and a king like David is a trust from God, not a function of his own sovereignty over humans. Significantly, even the vice-regency of a prophet and king like David is meant to establish God’s Rule on earth, not his own.

The sura goes on to discuss the reign of David’s son, Solomon. Verse 35 contains the following:

He said: “O my Rabb! Forgive me!  
And bestow upon me a domain  
That shall not befit anyone after me.  
Indeed, You are the Bestower!”

Muhammad Asad[[3]](#footnote-27) posits that this refers to “a spiritual kingdom”. However, it seems worth mentioning that according to the Historical Books of the Old Testament, indeed, following Solomon’s death, his kingdom was divided the neither of the remaining kingdoms ever reached the height of his.

Verses 50-64 describe the afterlife that awaits the faithful and unfaithful.

Neuwirth believes that verses 27 and 28 belong before 65 and 66 which together make up the first half of the last part of this sura. Since Ghazali considers 27 and 28 (along with 26, above) to be pearls, and 65 and 66, along with 67 and 68 to be jewels, I am including them here to be read together:

27: And We did not create the heavens and the earth,  
And what is in between, unjustly.  
That is the speculation of the disbelievers—  
Then, woe to the disbelievers from the Fire.

28: Would We make those who believe and engage in righteous deeds,  
Like those who spread mischief on earth?  
Would We make those who are conscious of Us,  
Like those who do evil?

65: Say: “I am not but a Warner,  
And there is no deity but Allah,  
The One, the Irresistible.

66: The Rabb of the heavens and the earth  
And what is in between,  
The Mighty, the Forgiving.”

67: Say: “That is momentous news,

68: From which you turn away.

The pearls, 27 and 28, contain a bit of theodicy, discussing why the wicked should seem to prosper while the righteous suffer.

The jewels in verses 65-68 (the only jewels in this sura) describe God’s transcendence. It is reminiscent of the words of Deutero-Isaiah (55:8):

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
and your ways are not my ways,” says Adonai.

The next verse is somewhat cryptic. It reads (without editorial amplification):

I had no knowledge of the highest domain,  
When they were arguing among themselves,

Asad’s translation reads as follows (with explanatory insertions):

[Say, O Muhammad:] “No knowledge would I have had of [what passed among] the host on high  
when they argued [against the creation of man],

This is a reference to a story that is not in the Bible itself but has persisted in the folklore around the Bible. In the 17th century C.E. we’ve seen this story portrayed by John Milton in his book *Paradise Lost*. It concerns the jealousy and rebellion of angels against the creation of humanity. This story continues through to verse 85 which culminates in an explanation of the satans’ role in the life of humanity.

Finally, the sura concludes with these pearls:

Say: “I do not seek any compensation from you for this,  
And I am not among those who make up pretenses.

This is but a Reminder for all the worlds.

And you shall learn what it conveys,  
When the time has come to pass.”

1. “Surah 38. Surah Saad”. 2017.History Of Islam. <https://historyofislam.com/the-quran/surah-38-surah-saad/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
2. Asma Barlas. “Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran (Kindle Locations 1443-1445). Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
3. Asad, Muhammad. (2003). The Message of the Qur’an (p. 788). Oriental Press. Dubai. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)