# Sura 55 - *ar-Raḥmān*

# الرحمن

## Introduction

Sura 55, known as *ar-Rahman*, translated variously as the Most Gracious, the Benficent, and the Most Merciful, takes its name from the first verse. It is regarded by many as the crown of the Qur’an. It is unclear as to whether it is an earlier Meccan sura or a later Medinan one.[[1]](#footnote-24) Muhammad Asad remarks on “the opinion that it followed immediately upon *surah* 13 (”Thunder“) . . . which is not very helpful since that *surah*, too, cannot be assigned to either of the two periods with any degree of certainty.”[[2]](#footnote-25)

This sura consists of a tripartite structure (not counting 31 repetitions of the refrain): 12, 14, 21 + 1[[3]](#footnote-26). The first two parts make up the first half and are hymns to God. The final part is an eschatology.[[4]](#footnote-27)

## I Hymn

Al-Ghazali considers this entire hymn (verses 1-13 including the refrain) among the jewels of divine knowledge.

### Hymnic Prelude: Revelation, Creation

The first four verses form a hymnic prelude, concerning revelation and creation. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed translates them thus:[[5]](#footnote-30)

1: The Most Compassionate,  
2: Taught the Qur’an;  
3: Created the human,  
4: Taught him speech (discourse, thought, logic, reason, comprehension, integration).

In her lecture on “Late Antique Qur’an”, Angelika Neuwirth observed that this passage places the teaching of the Qur’an *before* the creation of humanity.[[6]](#footnote-32) This recalls the opening of the Gospel of John:

1. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
2. He was in the beginning with God.
3. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being
4. in him was life,[a] and the life was the light of all people.
5. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

In other words, the Qur’an is to be understood, in this context, as a celestial text, not to be confused with the physical manifestation of it in the voice of the prophet, much less the transcription of that voice into a physical book. This ambiguity around the word Qur’an can also be found in the Jewish and Hindu traditions regarding the words *Torah* and *Veda* respectively. That is, in all of these cases, there is a celestial text which exists more as an idea or even a template of creation, and then there is the physical book that refers to that text. While it is no accident that both the transcendent and the physical are referred to by the same name, they one should not be confused with the other. It might be akin to pointing to Asia on a map. The “Asia” on the map is not the real Asia, but a signifier. I can point to the signifier of Asia on a map and say, “that’s Asia” without you thinking the actual continent is on that map. Similarly, the volume of the Qur’an that you hold in your hand can be considered a signifier of the true Qur’an that pre-exists creation.

### Hymnic Verse Pair

Dr. Nazeer Ahmed translates the next two verses thus:

5: The sun and the moon  
(Orbit) with mathematical precision,

6: And the stars,  
And the trees,  
Bow down in prostration.

### Ayat (Doubles): 3 V. Heaven, 3 V. Earth

The later half of this hymn consists of a pair of three verses each describing heaven and earth respectively:

7: And the heavens has He raised high  
And established (dynamic) equilibrium (therein),

8: So that you do not violate justice (in your own lives).

9:. And establish weight with equity,  
And do not compromise the balance.

10: And the earth has He shaped for the living creatures,

11: In it there are fruit,  
And date palms, of (many) varieties with sheathed clusters;

12: And grains with husks and herbs with scent,

### Refrain

Finally, the refrain:

13: Then, which of the bounties of your Rabb do you deny (O humans and Jinns)?

This refrain will repeat continuously throughout the rest of this sura. Nöldeke *et al*. find it “tiresome”,[[7]](#footnote-37) and to be fair, it is rather repetitive. However, two things must be kept in mind:

1. The Qur’an is meant to be recited and the recitation itself is a prayerful act and the repetition of this refrain would have a meditative effect on both the reciter and on listeners. You can listen to this refrain (and the whole sura) at <https://quran.com/55/13>
2. This sura is arguably a countertext to Psalm 136 of the Judeo-Christian tradition.[[8]](#footnote-39) As such, we should consider how this verse compares to the refrain from that text: “for his steadfast love endures forever.” (which occurs in all 26 verses of that psalm).

## II Hymn

The second hymn consists of two parts containing 10 and 4 verses respectively. The first 10 describe the magnificence of God and are among the jewels of divine knowledge. The latter four describe the threats of Allah and thus are omitted from Al-Ghazalli’s jewels.

### The Magnificence of God

Verses 14-29 describe the magnificence of God.

14: He has created the human from animated clay, (malleable) like that of pottery,  
15: And created the Jinn from turbulent fire,  
16: Then, which of the bounties of your Rabb do you deny (O humans and Jinns)?

17: The Rabb of the two Easts (inner in your souls and outer in nature)  
And of the two Wests (inner and outer).  
18: Then, which of the bounties of your Rabb do you deny (O humans and Jinns)?

19: He has floated the two oceans that meet,  
20: Between them is a partition that they do not cross,  
21: Then, which of the bounties of your Rabb do you deny (O humans and Jinns)?

22: From them are brought forth pearls and corals,  
23: Then, which of the bounties of your Rabb do you deny (O humans and Jinns)?

24: And His are the ships that move on the oceans, (rising high) like mountains,  
25: Then, which of the bounties of your Rabb do you deny (O humans and Jinns)?

Verses 26-27 can be considered the “heart” of this sura. In most suras, the heart is near the geometric center. This is in contrast to contemporary non-fiction writing which tends to put the thesis at the beginning and/or end of the text.

26: Upon all that exists, there shall be annihilation,  
27: The Being of your Rabb, the Lord of Majesty and Bounty, shall endure,  
28: Then, which of the bounties of your Rabb do you deny (O humans and Jinns)?

These six stanzas describing the magnificence of God can be considered in the same vein as their parallel in psalm 136:4-9:

4 who alone does great wonders,  
 for his steadfast love endures forever;

5 who by understanding made the heavens,  
 for his steadfast love endures forever;

6 who spread out the earth on the waters,  
 for his steadfast love endures forever;

7 who made the great lights,  
 for his steadfast love endures forever;

8 the sun to rule over the day,  
 for his steadfast love endures forever;

9 the moon and stars to rule over the night,  
 for his steadfast love endures forever;

Thus ends the second set of the jewels of divine knowledge. This section contains one more verse, transitioning to the next:

29: Whatever (and whoever) is in the heavens and the earth—ask of Him,  
Every moment He (reveals His Beautiful Names upon creation) with sublime glory,

### Threats of Allah

The next four verses describe the futility of trying to escape the judgment of God. They two echo the ensuing verses in psalm 136 which describe God’s judgment against Pharaoh and the other enemies of the Israelites, except that while psalm 136 focuses on the judgment meted out upon the enemies of Israel in the past, sura 55 focuses on the promise of judgment in the future.

## Eschatology

The shift from the Judaic historical orientation towards the Islamic eschatological one is made more fully in this final half of the sura.

#### Eschatological Scenery

And, as the sky is split open,  
And it turns red, crimson like hot turbulent oil,

#### Eschatological Process: The Evil on the يَوْمٍ

Verses 39-44 describe what will happen to those condemned on “the Day.” The word [يَوْمٍ](http://corpus.quran.com/wordmorphology.jsp?location=%2855:29:7%29), (or *yawmin*) translates literally as “day” but is a key word in the Qur’an. It is often capitalized in translation and generally refers to the Day of Judgment, the Apocalypse, the Eschaton, *etc.*

#### Eschatological Process: The Good at يَوْمٍ

Verses 46-60 describe the paradise that awaits the good on the Day. The imagery evokes that of the garden of Eden (Genesis 2) and should be understood in the context of the desolate Arabian desert which was the setting in which these verses were first spoken.

#### The Good Ones

Verses 62-76 goes into detail about “two Gardens.” It’s unclear exactly why there are two Gardens but the fact that this surah is explicitly addressed to both Jinn and Human, it seems plausible that the two Gardens exist for these two species of sen

#### Last Refrain and Conclusion: Doxology

77: Then, which of the bounties of your Rabb do you deny (O humans and Jinns)?

78: Sanctified is the Name of your Rabb,  
The Lord of Majesty and Bounties.

This conclusion is also the answer to the question in the refrain.

1. Ernst, Carl W. (2011-12-05). *How to Read the Qur’an: A New Guide, with Select Translations* (p. 40). The University of North Carolina Press. Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
2. Asad, Muhammad. (2003). *The Message of the Qur’an* (p. 937). Oriental Press. Dubai. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
3. Ernst, Carl W. (2011-12-05). *How to Read the Qur’an: A New Guide, with Select Translations* (p. 215). The University of North Carolina Press. Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
4. Neuwirth, Angelika. (2007) “Die Komposition der Suren und ihre Bauelemente” in *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*. Berlin. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
5. Ahmed, Nazeer. “Surah 55. Surat ur Rahman (The Most Compassionate)” in History of Islam, <https://historyofislam.com/the-quran/surah-55-surat-ur-rahman/> [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
6. Neuwirth, Angelika. “Late Antique Qur’an.” Public Lecture, Event from Institute for Advanced Study, June 3, 2009. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHCeYSvazY4> [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
7. Nöldeke, Theodor, Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträsser, O Pretzl, and Wolfgang Behn. 2013. *The History Of The Qur’an*. Leiden: Brill. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
8. Neuwirth, Angelika. “Scripture, Poetry, and the Making of a Community.” Public Lecture, Anis Makdisi Memorial Lecture from the American University of Beirut, May 20, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)