# Sura 56 - *al-Wāqiʻah*

# الواقعة

## Introduction

Sura 56, known as *al-Wāqiʻah*, translated variously as “The Inevitable”, “The Event”, or “That Which Must Come to Pass”, takes its name from the first verse. It is generally considered to be an early Meccan sura.

Like most suras, this one also consists of a tripartite structure which can be further subdivided.

## Eschatological Part

The first section of this part sets the scenery “when that which must come to pass [at last] comes to pass. . . . When the earth is starts to tremble . . . and the mountains are shattered”. (1-7)

It goes on to classify people into three classes:

* Those on the right (the righteous) (8)
* Those on the “left” (or evil side) (9)
* Those who take the lead, who are foremost (10)

It then describes the rewards that await: the foremost (11-26), the companions of the right (27-40), and the companions of the left (41-56)

## The Jewels

The heart of the sura is introduced with the question: “We have created you, so why do you not accept it as the truth?” and from there we find the signs or *ayat* which are among the jewels of divine knowledge. The first five verses direct the listener to the miracle of procreation, one of the signs (ayah) of the creator:[[1]](#footnote-26)

58: Have you ever considered that [seed] which you emit?

59: Is it you who create it – or are We the source of its creation?

60: We have [Indeed] decreed that death shall be [ever-present] among you: but there is nothing to prevent Us

61: from changing the nature of your existence and bringing you into being [anew] in a manner [as yet] unknown to you

62: And [since] you are indeed aware of the [miracle of your] coming into being in the first instance – why, then, do you not bethink yourselves [of Us]?

Indeed, is not one of the great questions simply: “why is there something instead of nothing?”

The second set of five verses point to the seeds of vegetation:

63: Have you ever considered the seed which you cast upon the soil?

64: Is it you who cause it to grow – or are We the cause of its growth?

65: [For,] were it Our will, we could indeed turn it into chaff, and you would be left to wonder [and to lament],

66: “Verily we are ruined!

67: Nay, but we have been deprived [of our livelihood]!"

Buddhists might refer to this as the principle of interdependence. There is no such thing as “a self-made man”.

Following this are three verses about the miracle of water, liquid water which makes our planet uniquely (so far as we yet know) suitable for life:

68: Have you ever considered the water which you drink?

69: Is it you who cause it to come down from the clouds – or are We the cause of its coming down?

70: [It comes down sweet – but] were it Our will, We could make it burningly salty and bitter: why, then, do you not give thanks [unto Us]?

And the following, about fire:

71: Have you ever considered the fire which you kindle?

72: Is it you who have brought into being the tree that serves as its fuel – or are We the cause of its coming into being?

73: It is We who have made it a means to remind [you of Us], and a comfort for all who are lost and hungry in the wilderness [of their lives].

Notice how the gift of fire carries with it an obligation to take care of others.

Finally:

74: Extol, then, the limitless glory of thy Sustainer’s mighty name!

## *Qur’an*-defense

The last part of the sura is a defense of the validity of the Qur’an. It begins with an oath (75-76) confirming its sublime origin (77-80). It continues with a polemic against the Qur’an’s opponents (81-87)[[2]](#footnote-28) followed by a recap of the rewards and punishments awaiting those drawn close to God (88-89), those who attain righteousness (90-91), and those who “call the truth a lie” (92-95). The sura concludes with the verse:

96: Extol, then, the limitless glory of thy Sustainer’s mighty name!

## Conclusion

The Qur’an frequently refers to pairs, but in this sura, it divides humanity into three parts. A dichotomy between “right” and “left” or “righteous” and “evil” would be typical enough not to require comment, but the existence of a third category seems unusual. In this sura, two parts of humanity are each promised a paradise while the third is assured of a brutal punishment. So what distinguishes the first two? It would seem that the first (v. 10, 88) are those who are naturally inclined toward God. The second, those associated with “the right hand” (v. 8, 90) must attain to it. That is, for them to be righteous is an act of will. This is similarly true of those associated with “the left hand”. It is clear from the Qur’an’s point of view that those who deserve punishment are those who have chosen to reject God. It is not out of ignorance, but out of pride. This seems an important distinction.

## References

Asad, Muhammad, and Ahmed Moustafa. 2003.The Message Of The Qurʼan. 1st ed. Bitton, England: Book Foundation.

Ernst, Carl W. (2011-12-05). How to Read the Qur’an: A New Guide, with Select Translations (pp. 215-216). The University of North Carolina Press. Kindle Edition.

1. This translation by Asad. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
2. It’s worth noting that Asad translates رِزْقَكُمْ in verse 82 as “your daily bread” which clearly evokes the Christian Lord’s Prayer (Our Father). I cannot tell if this allusion was deliberate by the author of the Qur’an or if it was a liberty taken by Asad, but it is an intriguing one and fitting. The Lord’s Prayer calls on God to give us “our daily bread” and here in this passage we see that God has provided that provision, only to have it rejected by the unfaithful. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)