Contemplating the Word, or the Calligraphic Work as «Image»

By: Patrick Ringgenberg

the final juzz of the Qur'an, that is, the last of the thirty more-or-less equal sections into which the holy text has been divided. Here, we can read Surahs 78 to 114, written in Kufic, Islam's first Qur'anic script, which was gradually abandoned after the 10th century in favor of more cursive styles. However, Seyed Vahid Jazayeri, master of Iranian calligraphy, has honorably revived it in works that sometimes recall the traditional and historic legacy (as here) and sometimes seek a more contemporary graphic style.

hat can these pages say to those who do not know the Qur'an, do not understand Arabic, and have no connection with the Islamic faith or aesthetics? How can they reveal their beauty? Although the fundamental purpose of calligraphy is to transmit a text with maximum clarity and elegance, the musical harmony of the script has an efficient power of its own, in that it conveys, in the blink of an eye – and even before any reading takes place – the majesty and importance of a text or a word. There are countless stories of conversions to Islam stimulated by hearing the Qur'an

chanted with passion. The visual beauty of an illuminated Qur'an has, potentially, the same effect. One cannot see the calligraphy without understanding the text, but even those who cannot read can appreciate the visual cosmology of Qur'anic calligraphy. Thus, the written beauty speaks in any case, whether or not the text is understood.

et us begin with the graphical contrasts: the script criss-crossed with verticals (shafts of letters like the alif (), horizontals (flatter letters that the calligrapher sometimes lengthens:), and curved letters like the waw that roll themselves up () to form circles and spirals. These components come together to express cosmic connections and structures. Verticality is the earth-sky polarity, the axis of transcendance and eternity, which cuts - like so many celestial bugle calls - the horizontality of the lines. These in turn evoke the horizon, the temporal world, the world of man. Lurking in this network of crossings is a basic rhythm that underlies our physical and spiritual geography (above, below, horizon), our built environment (the architect and mason, too, write in lines and curves, arches and domes, volumes and voids), and also expresses our metaphysical imagination (the Spirit is an axis, the Prophet is a pillar, the spiritual path is straight), our ritual prayer gestures (we stand upright like the letter $alif(\bigcup)$, then we prostrate

to touch the humble earth). In the straight or curved line of the letters, we easily recognize masculine and feminine connotations that are combined in writing () as in the cosmos and that – in nature as in culture – signal qualities and functions that are both different and complementary.

et us turn next to the rhythm: the cadence that energizes the lines gives life to the world of fluid geometry and makes calligraphy, not the static art of a fixed text, but, an almost musical process of revelation. Sometimes the calligrapher expands letters (), sometimes he condenses them (), sometimes he extends () or heightens (), and sometimes they curl up (), or interlace (). We cannot fail to see that the rhythms of the script project onto the paper the rhythms that move and shape humanity, history, the cosmos - contraction-expansion, inhale-exhale, roll uproll out, join-separate - rhythms that find their origin in the creative urge of God, who laid out the universe, the seven heavens (Q 67:3), spread out the world like a bed (Q 2:22), alternated day and night (Q 29:5), and who at the end of time will fold the sky like a herald's scroll (Q 21:104). Thus it is in the language of cosmic rhythms and archetypal polarizations that the pulsing of the script textualizes the Qur'an - the Book revealed by the Creator of the earth and the heavens. The circle is complete: writing

is the prerogative of humanity and language is the expression of God in humanity. But in its primordial graphic elements script can also show the texture of the world, the cycles of time, and the dramaturgy of space.

Following a usage introduced after the 8th century, the red dots (•) above or below the letters indicate vowels and thus permit a correct pronunciation of words whose structure is essentially consonantal. For a reader-chanter, these points bring to life the Qur'anic word, whose sonorous poetry is for a Muslim a supreme form of musicality. In contrast to the dark ink of the letters, these red vocalization marks show up on the silent page, like the harmonic mystery of the Book, to reveal a chant that allows the various voices of the discourse to be heard.

Inally, let us glance at the layout of the text: the precise yet subtle proportionality of the letters in relation to each other, the regularity of the lines (seven in number: the number of heavens, and the number of circumambulations of the Ka'aba), the rigor of the margins, the spacing between the words, and the harmony of solid and void on the page. This dynamic script structure is also a universe in miniature, and the harmony of every page, in the interaction of the details and their relationship

to the whole, presents a mirror of the visible harmony of the universe, the inner harmony of the man, and thence the beauty of the Divine, hidden yet blooming everywhere. The carrier – whether paper or parchment – over which this ink cosmogony is spread, has always been an image of the soul on which fate, faith and knowledge are written; it is also a symbol of that Tablet, on which, in God, the Qur'an is preserved (Q85:22).

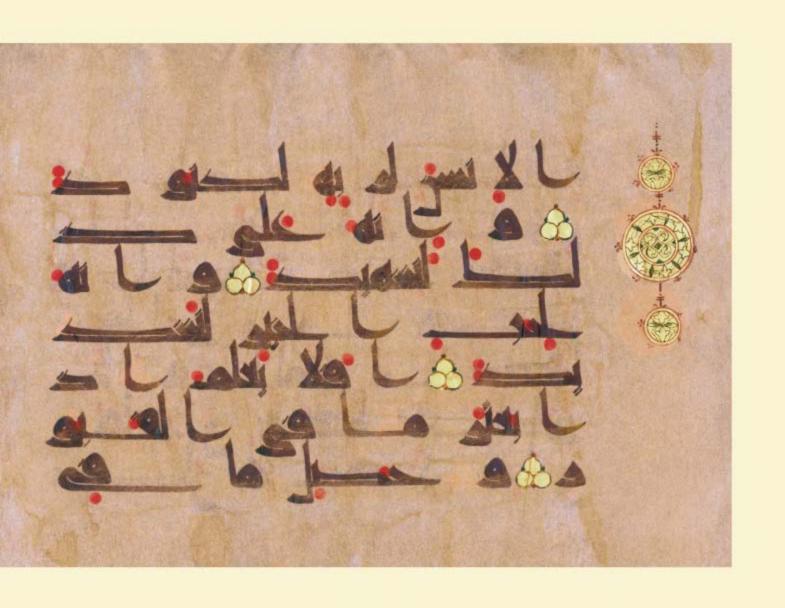
That, then, can we see when we contemplate the page of a calligraphed Qur'an? A graphic universe that is not only the trace of a gesture, a Word inked in ciphers, but a visual beauty rich with murmurs and harmonies that create the basic context for the gaze of man, for the world and for its Invisible One. To use the word and concept of an "image" for a calligraphed page would denote an over western vision of the work. It would also be inadequate to talk of "abstraction", for a script is only abstract to those who cannot read it. Yet, even without "iconography", a calligraphed Qur'an is both the text of a Message (the Qur'an, transmitted by the Prophet) and a message of beauty - radiant because of the script and yet also independently of it – a message of a worldview. Through letters and rhythms, the calligraphic art shows in its service to the text an awareness and a spirituality rooted in a society and culture impregnated with

a cosmic context. It would be a pity to stop at this visual beauty without taking an interest in the text it augments; but neither should reading the text distract from its graphic quality, for the beauty of the script is part of the glory of the writing and constitutes, even for those who cannot read it, the clear sign of a Revelation (Q 16:64/103).

Translated from French by Perette E. Michelli



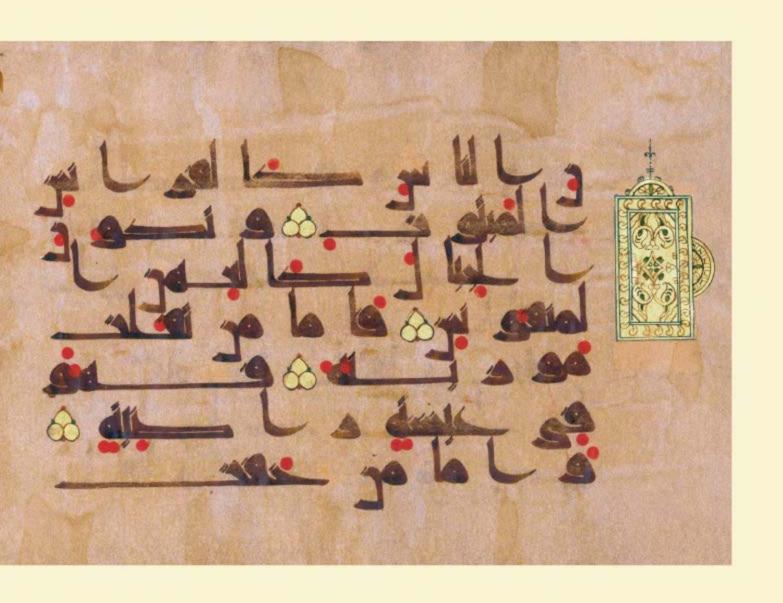
شرا يره . يسم الله الرحمن الرحيم و العديث ضبحا - فالموريت قد حا . فالمغيرت صبحا ، فأثرن به نفعا ، فو سطن به جمعا ، إن



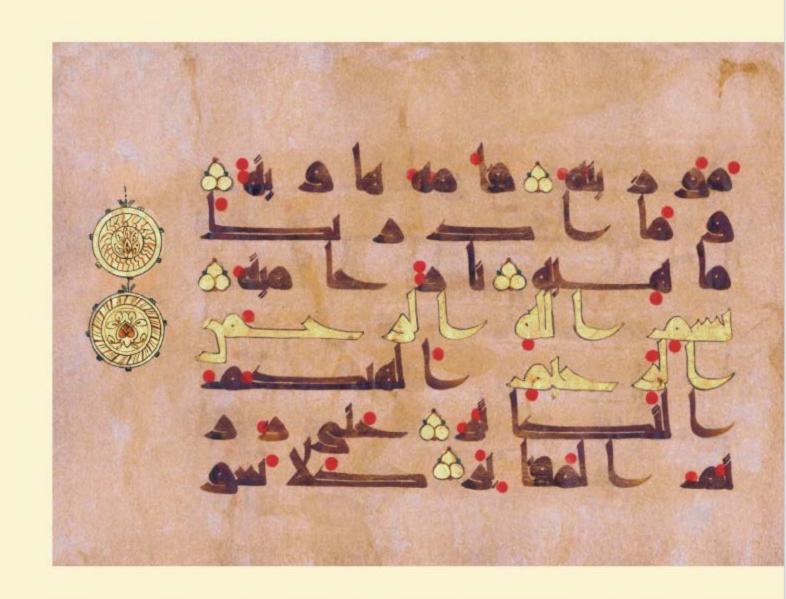
الإنسن لربه لكنود . و إنه على ذ لك لشهيد . و إنه لحب الخير لشد يد . أفلا يعلم إذ ا بعثر ما في القبو ر . و حصل ما في



الصدور . إن ر بهم بهم يومنذ لخبير . بسم الله الر حمن الرحيم القا رعة . ما القارعة . و ما أدريك ما القارعة . يوم يكو



ن الناس كالفراش المبثوث . و تكون الجبال كالعهن ا لمنفوش . فأما من ثقلت موزينه ، فهو في عيشة راضية . و أما من خفت



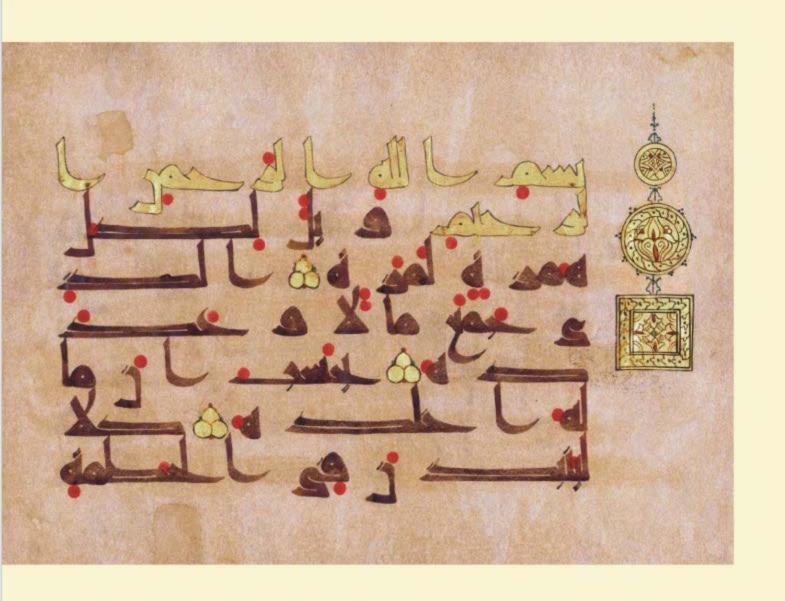
موزينه ، فأمه هاوية . و ما أدريك ماهيه ، نار حامية ، بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم ألهبكم التكاثر ، حتى زر تم المقابر . كلا سو



ف تعلمون . ثم كلا سوف تعلمون . كلا لو تعلمون علم ا ليقين . لترون الجحيم . ثم لترونها عين أ ليقين . ثم لتستلن يومنذ عن النعيم . بسم ا



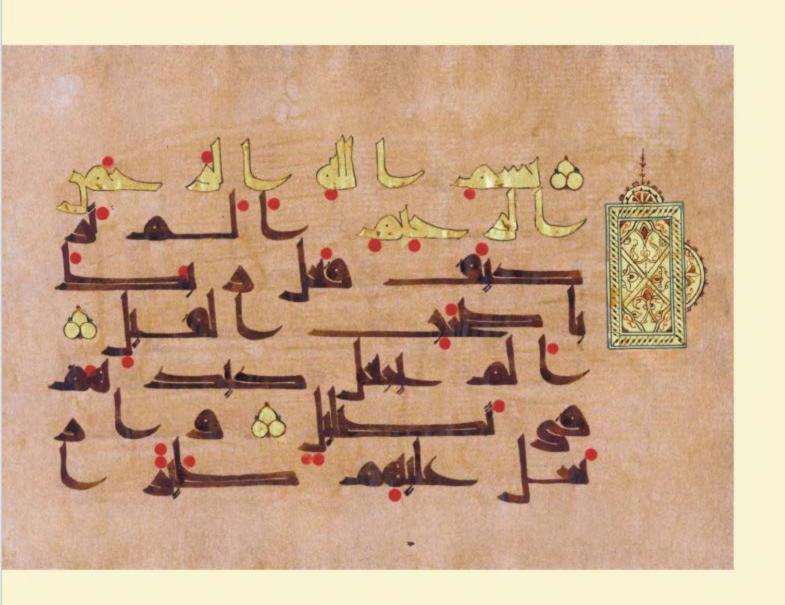
لله الرحمن الرحيم و العصر ، إن الإ نسن لفي خسر ، إلا ا لذين ، امنوا و عملوا الصلحت و تواصوا بالحق و تواصوا بالصبر .



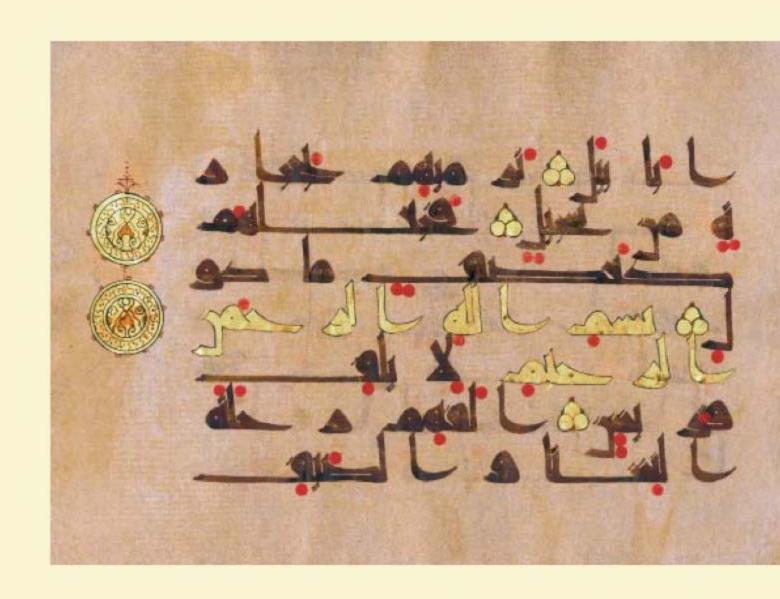
بسم الله الرحمن ا لرحيم ويل لكل همزة لمزة . الذ ى جمع مالا وعد ده . يحسب أن ما له أخلده . كلا لينبذن في الحطمة



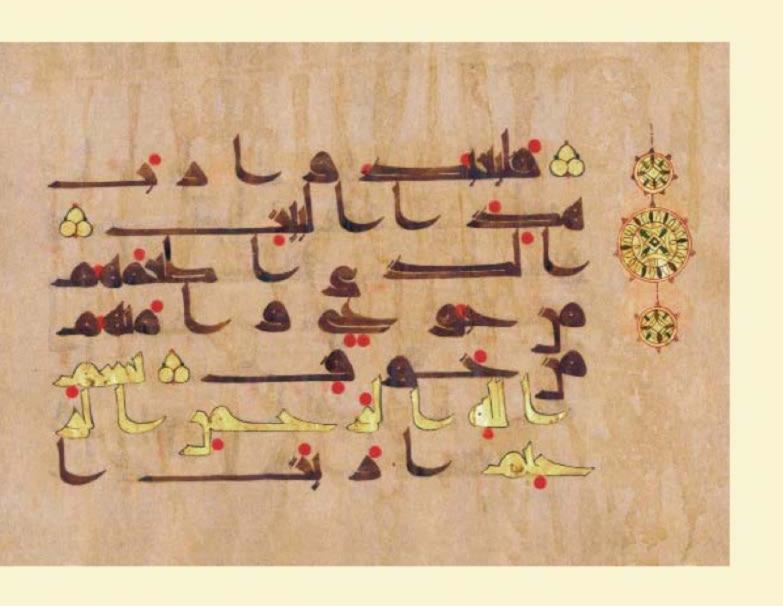
و ما أدريك ما الحطمة . نار الله الموقدة . التي تطلع على ا لأقده . إنها عليهم مؤصدة . في عمد ممددة



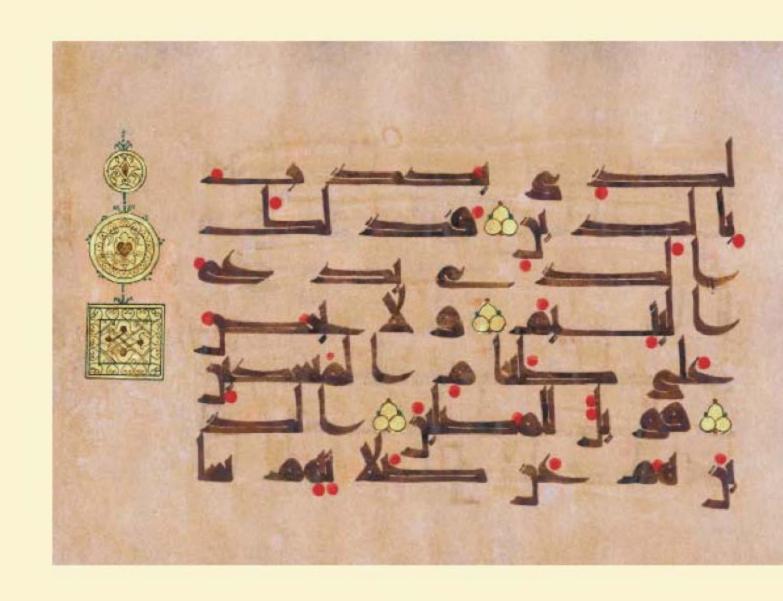
. يسم الله الرحمن الرحيم الرحيم الم تر كيف فعل ربك يأسم الفيل . يأسمت الفيل . أم يجعل كيدهم في تضليل . و أر سل عليهم طيرا



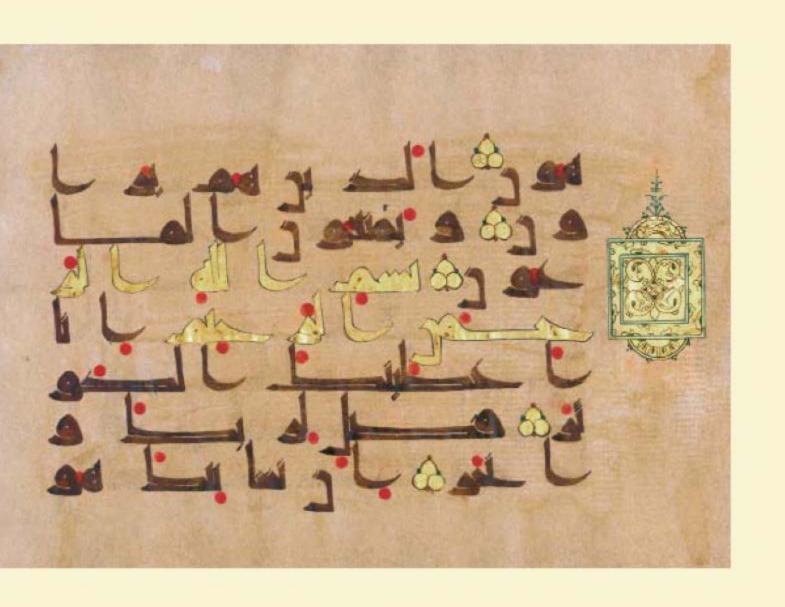
أبابيل . ترميم بحجار ة من سجيل . فجعلهم كعصف مأكو ل . يسم الله الرحمن الرحيم لإيلف قريش . إلفهم رحلة الشتاء و الصيف



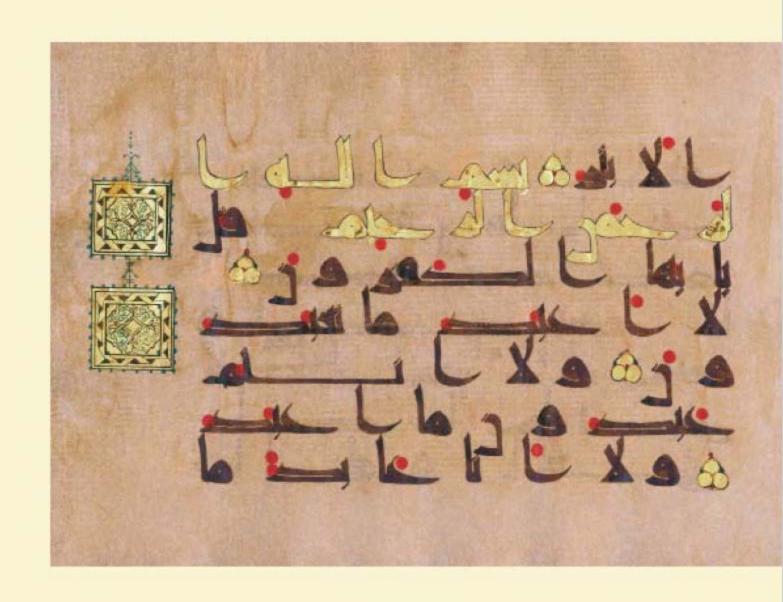
. فليعيدوا رب هذا البيت . الذي أطعمهم من جوع و ، أمنهم من خوف . بسم الله الرحمن الر حيم أر،يت ا



لذى يكذب بالدين . فذلك الذى يدع اليتيم . و لا يحض على طعام المسكين . فويل للمصلين . الذ ين هم عن صلاتهم سا



هون . الذين هم يرا ون - و يمنعون الما عون . بسم الله الر حمن الرحيم إنا أعطينك الكو ثر . فصل لريهم و انحر . إن شانتك هو



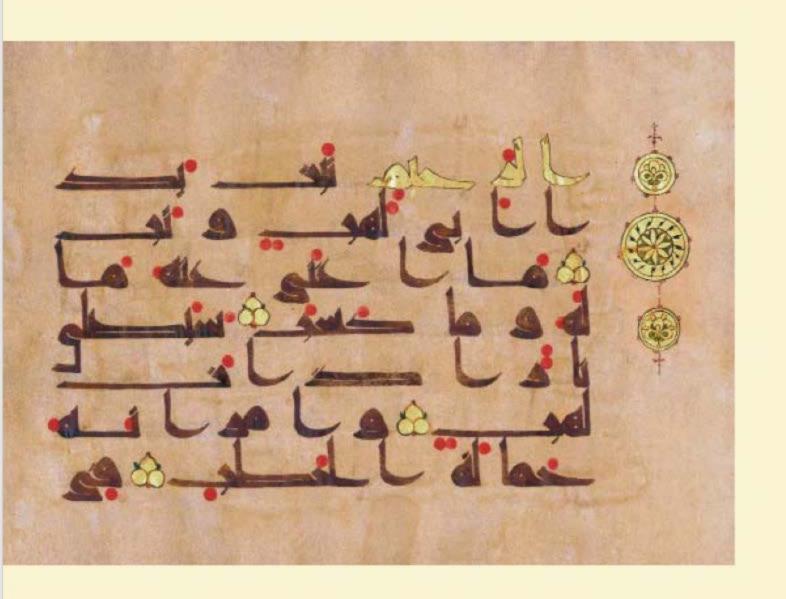
الأبتر . بسم الله ا لرحمن الرحيم قل يأيها الكفرون . لا أعيد ما تعيد ون . و لا أنتم عيدون ما أعيد . و لا أنا عايد ما



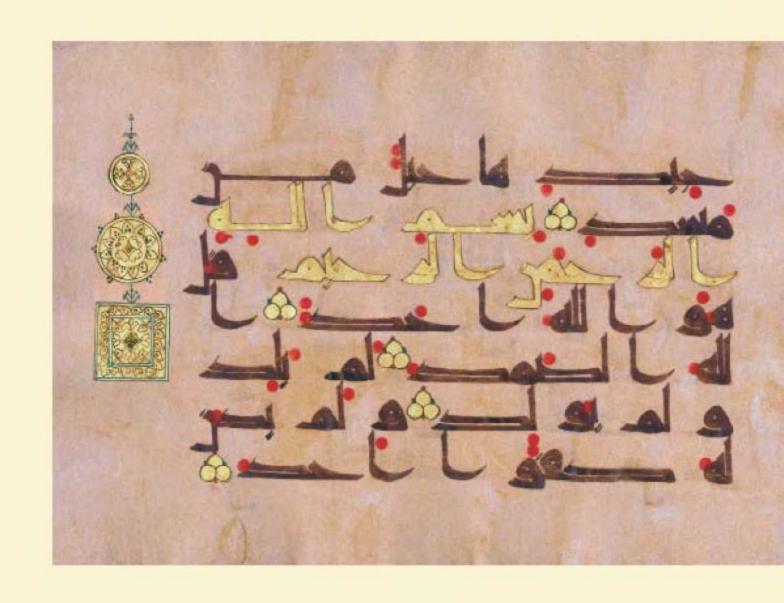
عبدتم . و لا أنتم عبدون ما أعبد . لكم دينكم ولى دين . بسم ا قد الرحمن الرحيم إنا جا، نصر الله و الفتح



و رأيت الناس يدخلون في د ين الله أفواجا فسيح بحمد ر بك و استغفره إ نه كان توابا . بسم الله الرحمن



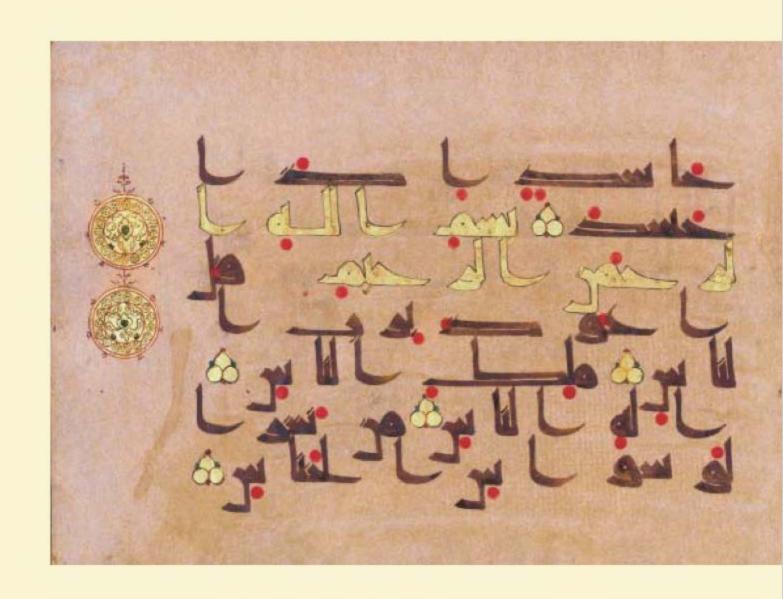
الرحيم ثبت يد ا أبي لهب رتب ، ما أغنى عنه ما له و ما كسب . سيصلى نارا ذات لهب . و امرأته حمالة الحطب . في



جيدها حبل من مسد . يسم الله الرحمن الرحيم قل هو الله أحد . ا لله الصمد . لم يلد و لم يولد . و لم يكن له كفوا أحد .



يسم الله الرحمن ا لرحيم قل أعود برب الفلق . من شر ما خلق . و من شر غا سق إذا وقب و من شر النفثت في العقد . و من شر



حاسد إذا حسد . بسم الله ا لرحمن الرحيم قل أعوذ برب ا لناس . ملك الناس. إله الناس . من شر ا لوسواس الخناس .



الذي يوسوس في صدور النا س. من الجنه والناس