

Gleanings from the Qur'an: Sūrat al-Kawthar and Sūrat al-‘Aṣr

The Qur'an animates most of Muslim life, either in the explicit text, or the inner teachings. As such, Muslims throughout time have tried to understand their sacred text, seeking out its ethical, metaphysical, and eschatological (*ma'ād*) teachings. Such a task, that of drawing from the spring of sacred knowledge, is ever more pertinent when we see ourselves overcome by immense difficulties, when nothing—neither moral, epistemic, nor metaphysical—seems to hold true in our world. It is then that the Qur'an shines brightest, illuminating our path towards the True and Real. With this in mind, we will be providing brief summaries of Qur'anic *tafāsīr*, God-willing, to glean some insights into this most central source of Islamic knowledge. This article inaugurates our series on Qur'anic tafsir, primarily drawn from *The Light of the Holy Quran*, compiled by Ayatullah Sayyid Kamāl Faqīh-Īmānī, but that will also include other relevant sources. In this first installation, Hasan Abdul-Kareem presents the *tafsīr* for *Sūrat al-Kawthar* and *Sūrat al-‘Aṣr*, two short yet profound surahs from the 30th *juz*'.

Sūrat al-Kawthar

Background

Sūrat al-Kawthar was revealed in Mecca as an answer to one of the pagans of Quraysh, ‘Ās ibn Wā’il. ‘Ās insulted the Prophet in front of other members of Quraysh, mockingly calling him *abtar*, “he who is cut off.” He was referring to the fact that the Prophet had no living male descendants; his only sons (Qāsim and ‘Abdullah) had died young.

This surah was revealed in the early stages of Islam when the Muslims were being severely oppressed by the pagan Meccans. It prophesies the abundant blessings that will come to and through the Prophet.

Verse 1

Definitions

The general meaning of *kawthar* is derived from the word *kathura*, “to be or become abundant; plentiful; large (in number)”; *kawthar* specifically refers to “a man who is bounteous and abundant in giving and goodness.”

Meaning

Allah begins the surah with the *basmalah* and follows by confirming that indeed he has given the Prophet *al-kawthar*. This verse prophesies the two gifts to be bestowed upon the Prophet: the stream in paradise called *al-kawthar*, and the blessed descendants from Lady Fatimah and Imam Ali. Therefore, we can view this verse as also prophesying the “abundance of blessings” in the form of the foremost from among their descendants, the subsequent eleven imams from the Ahl al-Bayt.

Hadith

According to one hadith, *al-kawthar* is stated as being the holy stream in paradise belonging to the Prophet. It is the spring or river the believers will drink from upon entering paradise. Therefore, this verse is important both as a specific promise to the messenger of Allah and his Ahl al-Bayt, and also as a general promise to all those faithful and pious followers of the Prophet and his divinely-appointed vicegerents.

Verse 2

Definitions

There are two main meanings for the word *inḥar*, the first referring to the throat—the place where the animal is slaughtered—and the second being from the verb *naḥara*, referring to the action of slaughter itself

Meaning

Allah follows up the declaration of his promise made in the first verse by commanding: “So, pray to your Lord, and sacrifice!” Allah is telling the Prophet to not let the polytheists’ oppression affect him and to persevere against the injustice of the Quraysh by being dedicated to constantly pray and sacrifice. This command of Allah should be viewed in terms of “continuance,” not in terms of “beginning,” since these two acts of worship were already part of the messenger’s personality, from his birth until his death.

Narrations

According to one hadith, angel Gabriel was reported to have told the Prophet that this *inhar* refers to “bringing the hands up to the throat” and declaring “*Allah Akbar*” or “God is Greater” between particular movements in the prayer. Another hadith is reported from Imam al-Ṣādiq, stating that this *inhar* refers to raising of the hands with the palms facing the qiblah (when declaring “*Allah Akbar*” in between the movements of prayer).

Verse 3

Definitions

The general meaning of the word *shāni*’ comes from *shana’ān*, meaning “enmity and spite.” Although *shāni*’ is usually translated as “enemy,” it actually means “one who acts with enmity or spitefulness,” which more accurately represents how the pagans of Mecca would antagonize the Prophet.

The word *abtar* literally means an “animal whose tail has been cut off.”

Meaning

Allah is making both a specific judgment against ‘Ās ibn Wā’il, and a general judgment against all polytheists and oppressors of the Prophet and Islam, when he turns their initial insults towards the Prophet—as “the one who is cut off”—back upon their own shoulders. Similar to the first verse, where Allah prophesies the “abundance of blessings,” here he prophesies the “cutting off” of the pagans of Mecca from their influence and dominance of Mecca and from the

prestige given to their lineage.

Sūrat al-‘Aṣr

Background

This surah was revealed during the Meccan period, although some claim it was revealed in Medina. Like *Sūrat al-Kawthar*, *Sūrat al-‘Aṣr* was revealed when Islam and the Muslims were heavily suppressed by the Quraysh. Allah in this surah prescribes for the believers a holistic path for self-development and puts a particular emphasis on the value of time.

Verse 1

Definitions

There are several interpretations for the meaning of ‘*aṣr*’ in this verse, including:

1. “Evening”
2. The entire duration of mankind’s history
3. A specified and emphasized era in the history of mankind
4. The “pressing or squeezing” that occurs in people’s life that brings them to an awareness of Allah
5. The daily ‘*aṣr*’ prayer, which is uniquely emphasized, which some understand to be *ṣalāt al-wuṣṭā* referred to in *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, ayah 238

Meaning

Allah begins the chapter with the *basmalah* before swearing by the establishment of time immemorial. The word ‘*aṣr*’ actually means to “squeeze or press,” a metaphor; the day is “squeezed” in the evening, when all things in creation are overwhelmed by the power of Allah. Allah’s power and dominance over creation comes in the form of the daily shifting of light to darkness,

demarcating our rhythm of time itself; the rotation of earth on its axis; and an awe-inspiring planetary orbit that keeps our Earth revolving around the sun, providing the light source for our daily shift between light and dark. Consequently, Allah is simply setting the stage for this surah, by humbling his insignificant creatures with the establishment of this divine reality.

Verse 2

Definitions

The word *khusr* actually means to “suffer loss of capital, e.g. wealth, resources” *Khusr* can either be a physical or a spiritual loss of capital. In this verse, *khusr* means “the loss of spiritual capital.” An example of this meaning of *khusr* can also be found in *Sūrat al-Zumar: ayah 15*.

After swearing by time immemorial and firmly establishing his dominance over His creation, Allah pronounces a universal truth about the inward reality of the human being. The human being in his quest to find meaning in life is faced with the dilemma of choosing either to gain or to squander his time. Allah appears to be indicating in this verse, however, that most human beings are in a perpetual state of loss.

Narrations

Imam Muḥammad al-Naqī is reported to have alluded to the spiritual tug of war highlighted in this verse by stating: “The world is a market wherein some people gain, while others lose.”

Verse 3

Definitions

Ṣāliḥāt is used in the plural form to indicate that to simply do one or a few good deeds is not sufficient; rather what Allah means here is that one must continuously perform good deeds throughout one’s life.

The word used for the enacting of the last two principles is *tawāṣaw*, which comes from *tawāṣī*, meaning to “enjoin or recommend to one another.” The usage of this word and repetition of this word in the sūrah positions the person of faith away from being a passive bystander towards being an active and engaged participant in the world around him. Consequently, through this activity, the person of faith becomes both a steward of the earth and a beacon of spiritual wakefulness for his fellow man.

The word *ḥaqq* generally means “truth,” but it is such a rich word that it actually contains upto twelve other meanings presented throughout the Qur’an. Among these are: “Allah, Qur’an, Islam, theism, justice, truthfulness, sincerity, [and] clarity.” Therefore, this reference to encourage the enjoining of *ḥaqq* can be viewed as encompassing any or all of these meanings of *ḥaqq*, since the verse here is left unqualified and general in its import.

Meaning

Allah, knowing the weakness of his creatures, and through his infinite love and wisdom, desires to provide a road map to success:

1. To have firm faith in Allah, his prophets, divinely appointed vicegerents, angels, etc.;
2. To do good deeds;
3. Encouraging each other toward truth;
4. And encouraging each other toward patience.

One must integrate these life principles into his or her life. This will establish a strong foundation for the completeness that each person seeks in life—an answer to the quest of how to deal with the short time allotted to our lives in this world. We must order our principles because they reflect the particular stages of human spiritual development. These four principles are arranged in a way so as to progressively take the individual away from the default movement towards loss and move him towards success.

A concise analysis of the steps leading from the initial stage of self-development

to the last, which moves a person away from a state of loss, can be found below:

Firmness of faith leads one to act in an outward fashion that reflects his or her inner reality. The enacting of the faith in one's soul naturally leads a person to the the doing of good deeds, mirroring his developed inner reality. The good deeds with foundations firmly planted in faith necessitate encouraging others to uphold truth. However, when truth is encouraged over falsehood, resistance is inevitable, due to most people being in this state of loss (as described in the previous verse), and having yet to experience the light of these core principles. Therefore, one must also strives towards patience and persevere if he or she wishes to succeed.

Narrations

In *Nahj al-Balāghah*, sermon 118, Imam 'Ali is reported to have described his faithful companions with the following: "You are supporters of Truth, and brothers in faith (or religion)." In this address to his companions, Imam Ali qualifies his true companions as being exemplary personalities who personify the principles highlighted in this last verse of *Sūrat al-'Aṣr*.