The Opening

_al-Fātiḥah_

_al-Fātiḥah_ is considered by the vast majority of scholars to be among the first _sūrah_ s to have been revealed in Makkah. According to Mujāhid (d. 104/722–23), one of the leading scholars among the second generation of Muslims, this _sūrah_ was revealed in Madinah (W). Most scholars claim that this is impossible, however, as the Muslims would not have been able to perform their required prayers without it (Q, T, W). The primary meaning of _al-Fātiḥah_ is “The Opening,” which indicates the _sūrah_ ’s function as “the opening of the Book” (Fātiḥat _al-kitāb_) and as the first _sūrah_ to be recited in each cycle (rakʿah) of all the canonical prayers as well as the manner in which it serves as an opening for many functions in everyday Islamic life. It can also be taken as a reference to this _sūrah_ ’s ability to open one’s breast to faith in God.

The Fātiḥah is often believed to be a synthesis of the Quran’s message and to be its most important _sūrah_. Hence it has been given the title _Umm al-kitāb_, “Mother of the Book,” a term also applied to other aspects of the Quran (3:7) and to the celestial archetype of the Quran and in fact all sacred scripture (see 13:39; 43:4). It is also known as “The Mother of the Quran” (IK, T), a reference to its containing the meaning of the entire Quran (IK). Other titles are “The Seven Oft-Repeated” (_al-Sabʿ al-mathānī_, 15:87); “The Cure” (_al-Shifā_), because it is said to have healing powers for both body and soul; and “The Foundation” (_al-Asās_), because it serves as a foundation for the whole of the Quran. Also known as _Sūrat al-Ḥamd_, “The Chapter of Praise,” and _Sūrat_
al-Ṣalāh, “The Chapter of the Prayer,” the Fāṭihah is recited at the beginning of each cycle of prayer by all Sunnis and many Shiites. In Shiite law one is allowed to recite the Fāṭihah in the third and fourth cycles or to recite, “Glory be to God, and praise be to God. There is no god but God, and God is great.” It is also recited by Muslims on occasions as diverse as a funeral, a wedding, the birth of a child, the inauguration of an official event, the signing of contracts, and the commencement of an individual endeavor, such as the beginning of a journey. In some lands, funeral services are referred to as fāṭihah, because they mark an opening from one life to another.

Many sayings of the Prophet Muhammad attribute an exalted status to the Fāṭihah. In one, the Prophet told a man that he would teach him the greatest sūrah; when asked what it was, the Prophet responded, “It is Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds, the seven oft-repeated, and the Mighty Quran [15:87] that I was given” (IK, W). A famous ḥadīth qudsī—that is, a non-Quranic saying of God reported by the Prophet—states, “I have divided the prayer between Myself and My servant, and My servant shall have that for which he prays. When the servant says, ‘Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds,’ God says, ‘My servant has praised Me.’ When the servant says, ‘The Compassionate, the Merciful,’ God says, ‘My servant has magnified Me.’ When the servant says, ‘Master of the Day of Judgment,’ God says, ‘My servant has glorified Me. . . . This is My portion and to him belongs what remains’” (Ṭ, Ṭs). Seen in this light, the Fāṭihah is more than the confessional prayer of Muslims. It is a prayer that encapsulates all the metaphysical and eschatological realities of which human beings must remain conscious; God asks human beings to recite it because it contains in principle the nature of God and the disposition God wishes them to have toward Him. The Fāṭihah thus has a threefold structure: the first three verses deal with the nature of God, the middle verse deals with the relationship between God and human beings, and the last three verses deal with the various states of human beings.

Many other reports from the Prophet and his Companions indicate the great power that Muslims associate with this sūrah. In one the Prophet says, “By Him in Whose Hand lies my soul, in neither the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospel, nor the Quran was the like of it revealed” (IK, Sh). According to another saying attributed by some to Mujāhid (Q) and by others to the Prophet
himself (Sh), “Satan was frightened four times: when he was cursed by God; when he was expelled from the Garden; when Muhammad was sent [as a messenger]; and when the Fātiḥah was revealed.”

The exalted status of the Fātiḥah has resulted in numerous independent commentaries upon it, some numbering hundreds of pages. Such commentaries, which could be said to constitute a subgenre of Quranic exegesis, often attempt to illustrate the manner in which the whole of the Quran is contained in this sūrah. According to a famous saying attributed to ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, who became the first Imam of Shiite Islam (632–61) and the fourth Caliph of Sunni Islam (656–61), “The whole of the Quran is contained in the Fātiḥah, the whole of the Fātiḥah in the basmalah [‘In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful’], the whole of the basmalah in the bāʾ [the opening letter], and the whole of the bāʾ in the diacritical point under the bāʾ.” This point can be understood to represent the first drop of ink from the Divine Pen (al-qalam; see 68:1c; 96:4c) with which God wrote the archetypes of all things upon the Preserved Tablet (al-lawḥ al-mahfūz; see 85:22c) before their descent into the realm of creation. In this sense, just as the basmalah marks the beginning of the Quran, so too does it mark the beginning of creation.

1 In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.
2 Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds, 3 the Compassionate, the Merciful, 4 Master of the Day of Judgment. 5 Thee we worship and from Thee we seek help. 6 Guide us upon the straight path, 7 the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those who incur wrath, nor of those who are astray.

Commentary

1 In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.
All but one of the 114 sūrah of the Quran begin with *In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful,* known as the *basmalah* in Arabic, which also appears in 27:30. There is a debate as to whether the *basmalah* is a verse of each sūrah or an indication of the beginning of a new sūrah. Whether or not it is considered a numbered verse, in most schools of Islamic Law, with the exception of the Shāfiʿī and Jaʿfarī schools, the *basmalah* is not recited with any of the sūrah during the daily prayers. In this regard, Anas ibn Mālik (d. 91/709), a close Companion of the Prophet, is reported to have said, “I have prayed behind the Prophet, Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, and ʿUthmān [the first three Caliphs of Islam], and they each began their recitation with *Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds,* without mentioning *In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*’ (IK, Q, Sh, Z).

But in another tradition, Abū Hurayrah (d. 61/681), another of the Prophet’s Companions, is reported to have recited the *basmalah* while leading the prayer and to have then said, “Among you I perform the prayer that is closest to the prayer of the Messenger of God” (IK). Based upon a saying of Jáfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), the sixth Shiite Imam, who was also a pivotal intellectual figure in the Sunni tradition, which states that the *basmalah* is “the greatest verse in the Book of God,” Shiite scholars all maintain that the *basmalah* is a verse of the Fātiḥah and of every other sūrah that begins with it (Ṭb, Ṭs). Others say that it is a verse, though separate from the sūrah that begin with it (IK). In this regard, Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687), a cousin of the Prophet who was among the most important scholars of the Quran in the first generation of Muslims, is reported to have said that the Prophet did not know the point at which to separate one sūrah from the next until God revealed *In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful* (Sh).

The *basmalah,* or its shortened form, *In the Name of God,* is employed by pious Muslims to consecrate all licit actions, since from a Quranic perspective all things should be performed for the sake of God and in His Name. In this vein the Prophet said, “Any important matter not begun with the Name of God shall be cut off” (Ṭb). The preposition *in* (bi) could imply a verb at the beginning of the sentence, such as “I begin” or “I seek help” *in the Name of God* (R, Ṭb), or a noun, such as “The beginning of the discussion is *in the Name of God*” (R). Alternately, these same phrases could be seen as following the verse, for example, “*In the Name of God I begin*” (R). *In the Name of God* is also understood to mean, “I began *in the Name of God,* so you too begin,” as if God were saying, “I began through My Name, was united with My Name, and have commenced in My Name so begin through My Name, unite with My Name, and commence in My Name’ (My).

*God* renders *Allāh,* which according to some is a unique word with no root and according to others derives from the word al-Ilāh, or “the Divine” (Ṭb). The Quranic usage of *Allāh* indicates that it was already known to the pre-Islamic Arabs, as in 43:87, which says of the pagan Arabs, *Wert thou to ask them,* “Who
created you?” they would surely say, “God (Allāh)” (cf. 29:61, 63; 31:25; 39:38). Nonetheless, the supreme sovereignty of Allāh was not accepted by the vast majority of those who worshipped idols in a period referred to in the Quran as the Age of Ignorance (jāhiliyyah; 3:154; 5:50; 33:33; 48:26). Allāh is not only the most universal and all-embracing Name, but also the most specific of the Divine Names in that it cannot be used to describe any being other than God, whereas some other Divine Names may (al-Ghazzālī, Divine Names). Some refer to Allāh as the All-Encompassing Name, which comprises all of the Names and Attributes of God (Bq); see 112:1c. The ordering of the three Divine Names in the basmalah can be seen as an allusion to the levels of Divinity in relation to the created order: God (Allāh) refers to the Divine Essence, Principle, or Self; the Compassionate (al-Rahmān) refers to the unity of God’s Attributes; and the Merciful (al-Raḥīm) to the unity of God’s acts (K).

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2. Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds,

Praise translates al-ḥamd, which indicates extolling the Praiseworthy (mahmūd) and giving thanks to Him for all of the favors He has bestowed in this world and for the reward that will be given in the next world. In this vein, the Prophet is reported to have said, “When you say, ‘Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds,’ you will have thanked God and He will increase your bounty” (T). But whereas thanks (shukr) is given for what one has already received, praise is given for the qualities the One Who is praised possesses prior to having bestowed anything and is thus more universal (Q). Praise (al-ḥamd) is rendered in the definite rather than the indefinite to indicate that all forms of praise and all gratitude belong to God (T). It is said that God has praised Himself in this opening address so that human beings can praise God in the speech of God, since God knows that they cannot praise Him fully in their own words (Qu). Regarding the inability of human beings to praise God fully, the Prophet is reported to have addressed God, saying, “There is no way to enumerate the praise due to Thee; Thou art as Thou hast praised Thyself” (Qu).

Similar to the basmalah, Praise be to God is a frequently repeated formula recited by Muslims on many occasions throughout their daily lives. But whereas the basmalah is employed to consecrate a deed at its beginning, Praise be to God is employed to thank God for an act or event upon its completion. According to traditional Islamic etiquette, whenever one is asked how one is feeling, the correct response should be Praise be to God, no matter one’s condition.

Reference is made to God as Lord throughout the Quran and as Lord of the
worlds some forty-two times. Lord renders rabb, which refers to a master who is obeyed (sayyid), to one who puts matters in their proper order, and to one who possesses something. In reference to God it thus means that He is the Master without peer, Who arranges the affairs of all His creatures and to Whom all of creation belongs (Ṭ). Some also relate Lord (rabb) to “cultivation” (tarbiyah), since God is the Caretaker (murabbī) of all things as well as the Trainer and Caretaker of our souls, hearts, and spirits (Qu).

The worlds refers to various levels of cosmic existence and the communities of beings within each level. Some say it refers to four communities: human beings, jinn, angels, and satans (Q), while others say it refers only to human beings and jinn, since the Prophet is referred to as a warner unto the worlds (25:1), and only jinn and human beings are in need of a warner (Q). It may also refer to the different generations of human beings, to all of the species in creation (Q, Ṭ), or to God’s being the Sovereign over every level of creation from the earth through the seven heavens, as in those verses that refer to God as Lord of the heavens and the earth (13:16; 17:102; 18:14; 19:65; 21:56; 26:24; 37:5; 38:66; 43:82; 44:7; 78:37). Thus some say that in the most universal sense the worlds refers to all existent things other than God (IK, Q). In this vein, the commentator Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī note that there is infinite space beyond this world and that God can actualize all possibilities, even worlds and universes of which we have no knowledge. The verse thus refers to God being the Lord of all that can be seen or imagined and of all that cannot be seen or imagined by human beings. In this sense, the verse conveys that God is Lord of all “space,” not only physical space, and therefore of all that exists, no matter what the nature of that existence may be. For this reason, there is no thing, save that it hymns His praise (17:44).

3 the Compassionate, the Merciful,

3 This verse repeats the two Divine Names, the Compassionate (al-Raḥmān) and the Merciful (al-Raḥīm), that are recited in the basmalah at the opening of each sūrah, except for Sūrah 9, “Repentance” (al-Tawbah). Both Names are intensifications of the word raḥmah, meaning “Mercy” or “Loving-Mercy.” Al-Raḥmān, which is also the title of Sūrah 55, is considered to be more emphatic, embracing, and encompassing than al-Raḥīm (IK, Qu, Ṭ). It is one of the Divine Names that cannot be applied to anything other than God, either literally or figuratively, since it connotes the Loving-Mercy by which God brings forth existence. Al-Raḥīm indicates the blessing of nourishment (rizq) by which God sustains each particular existent thing. Thus it may apply figuratively to creatures,
and the adjective raḥīm is in fact used to describe the Prophet in 9:128. As al-Raḥmān is more encompassing, it is closer to the highest Name of God, Allāh; 17:110 enjoins the Prophet to say, Call upon God, or call upon the Compassionate. Whichever you call upon, to Him belong the Most Beautiful Names. The relationship between them is thus presented as that of different levels or degrees of light: al-Raḥmān is like the light of the sun that illuminates the whole sky, and al-Raḥīm is like the particular ray of sunlight that touches a creature. In Islamic metaphysics and cosmology it is stated that it was by God breathing “the Breath of the Compassionate” (Nafas al-Raḥmān) upon the immutable essences (al-aʿyān al-thābitah), which are the archetypes of all things in Divine Knowledge, that the world was brought into being. From this perspective, the very existence of the world is in essence nothing but the breath of Divine Compassion.

Together these two Names refer to two aspects of the Divine Mercy (raḥmah): one essential and universal, the other attributive and particular. The first is that by which creation is brought forth, while the second is that by which God shows Mercy to those whom He will, as in 33:43: And He is Merciful (raḥīm) unto the believers. The essential and universal Mercy is that of the Compassionate, which God bestows upon all things through their very existence and is the Divine aspect referred to in 20:5: The Compassionate mounted the Throne; and 25:59: Then mounted the Throne, the Compassionate [is He]. The particular Mercy is that of the Merciful, through which each creature that exists is sustained and which varies in mode according to the manner in which this Divine Name or Attribute has become manifest. It is evident that Divine Names of beauty, such as “the Kind” (al-Laṭīf), “the Clement” (al-Ḥalīm), and “the Beautiful” (al-Jamāl), are manifestations of Mercy. But in Divine Names of rigor, such as “the Powerful” (al-Qādir), “the Avenger” (al-Muntaqim), and “the Abaser” (al-Mudhll), the manifestation of Divine Mercy is veiled by the inseparability of God’s Kindness from His Majesty and determinative power (qadar). God is thus said to be Compassionate toward all of creation and Merciful toward the believers (Ṭb).

Positioned between v. 2, which alludes to God being the Sovereign over all dimensions of space, both seen and unseen, and v. 4, which alludes to God being the Master of all time, since all things end on the Day of Judgment, this verse indicates that God’s Mercy encompasses and interpenetrates all time and all space, as in 7:156: My Mercy encompasses all things.

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4 Master of the Day of Judgment.

4 Master renders mālik, which can also mean “owner.” It is also sometimes
read *malik*, meaning “king” or “sovereign,” and both variants can be traced to the Prophet (Q). *Malik* (“king”) is understood to be more intensive than *mālik* (“master”), since every king is a master, but not every master is a king (Q, Ṭ, Z), though others maintain that *malik* is more comprehensive, since it indicates God’s Power of disposal over all things (Q). That God is Master of the Day of Judgment indicates that He alone has sovereignty over the Day of Reckoning and that all those who seek to contend with His Absolute Sovereignty will be brought low on that Day, as in 40:16, where it is described as the Day when they come forth with naught concerning them hidden from God. Whose is the sovereignty this Day? It is God’s, the One, the Paramount (IK, Ṭ). In this regard, the Prophet is reported to have said, “On the Day of Judgment, God will grasp the earth, fold up the sky with His Right Hand [see 39:67], and proclaim, ‘I am the King, where are the kings of the earth? Where are the tyrants?’” (IK).

*The Day of Judgment* is the day on which the account of jinn and human beings comes due. That God is Master of this day alludes to the inevitability of the meeting with God, since all are returning to Him (see, e.g., 2:156, 245, 281; 3:55, 83; 5:48, 105; 6:36, 61–62, 108, 164; 7:29; 21:93). Judgment renders *dīn*, which is etymologically related to “obedience” and to “custom,” “way,” or “affair.” It is, however, most often rendered “religion.” *Dīn* is also closely related to the word “debt” (*dayn*), found in 2:282: *When you contract a debt (dayn) with one another for a term appointed, write it down.* While *dayn* refers to a debt, *dīn* refers to the repayment of our debt to God, and God is also known as *al-Dayyān*, meaning “The One Who Repays” (Q). The Day of *dīlān* can thus be understood as the day of the requital and reckoning for actions performed in this world (IK, Q, Ṭ), as in 24:25: On that Day God will pay them their just due in full; and 40:17: On that Day every soul shall be recompensed for that which it has earned (cf. 45:28; IK, Q). This day is also referred to as the Day of Reckoning, since all of one’s good and bad deeds will be weighed and one will be taken to account for all that transpired during the life of this world, as in 7:8–9: And the weighing on that Day is true. So those whose balance is heavy, it is they who shall prosper. And as for those whose balance is light, it is they who have ruined their souls by having treated Our signs wrongfully (see also 21:47c; 101:6–9c). Given the importance and finality of this accounting, when asked, “Who is the most intelligent of believers?” the Prophet replied, “The most frequent in recalling death, and the best prepared for what follows it, they are the most intelligent.” Following upon the Prophet’s advice, the second Caliph, Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 22/644), is reported to have said, “Bring yourself to account before you are brought to account. And weigh your deeds before your deeds are weighed” (IK).

From one perspective, in the progression of Divine Names from *Allāh* to *al-Raḥmān, al-Raḥīm, and al-Mālik* (or al-Malik) there is a descent from the highest level of the Divine Essence down to those levels that are in direct relation to the
created order, *al-Raḥmān* denoting the general mercy that encompasses all things, and *al-Raḥīm* denoting the particular mercy that God bestows upon those whom He chooses. Then God’s function as *al-Malik* or *al-Mālik* pertains to His management of all affairs in the created order. It is in a sense a “lower” Divine Name, because the existence of an “other” is necessary for this aspect of God to become fully manifest. Thus, like the name *al-Raḥīm* it pertains to the Divine acts. In this sense, the progression of Names in vv. 1–4 reflects the descent of the created order from the Divine Principle. The second half of the *Fātiḥah* then pertains to the ascent from the created order back to the Divine Principle.

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We worship


In v. 5 begins the direct address of God in the second person, a marked change from the praise and description of God in vv. 1–4 (IK, Q). Human beings speak here in the first-person plural, hence not only as individuals, but also as vicegerents of God (see 6:165c), supplicating God on behalf of all creation. To speak to God in the first-person plural rather than the singular also implies humility before the Divine (Ṭb), both because one is not focused solely upon oneself and because one acknowledges that ultimately only God has the right to say “I.”

*We worship* renders the verb *naʿbudu*, which also indicates servitude, obedience, and adoration. The first phrase thus indicates standing before God as a humble adoring servant or as a slave (ʿ*abd*), the state that in reality all created beings are in before God, as in 19:93: *There is none in the heavens and on the earth, but that it comes unto the Compassionate as a servant (ʿ*abd*).* In the context of the previous verses, which recognize that God is *Lord of the worlds*, or all “space,” and Master of all time, this verse recognizes the state of complete servitude before God, as reflected by the construction of the sentence in which the direct object is placed before the verb (Ṭb).

Addressing God in the second person rather than the third person indicates a direct I-Thou relationship in which God is worshipped as one who is present before the worshipper and whom the worshipper thus addresses directly (Ṭb), a privilege given in Islam to all human beings, who are not in need of a distinct priestly class to function as intermediaries between human beings and God. Correspondingly, worshippers should be fully present before their Lord. Their attention should not be divided between God and something else, either openly, as in idol worship, or secretly, as in the case of those who worship God distracted by thoughts and subjective desires or intent upon personal reward. Rather, one should *worship God, devoting religion entirely to Him* (39:2; Tb). In this vein, Jaʿfar

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al-Ṣādiq is reported to have said, “Worship is of three kinds: some people worship God out of fear, and that is the worship of slaves; other people worship God seeking reward, and that is the worship of hirelings; and some people worship God out of love, and that is the worship of those who are free, and that is the most excellent worship” (Ṭb).

True worship or servitude (ʿibādah) is understood by some to constitute the greatest degree of humility and self-effacement before God (Aj), which is necessary in order to recognize one’s complete reliance upon Him, since God is the Rich, and you are the poor (47:38). The expression of servitude necessarily precedes the statement that one “seeks help” from God, since one does not seek help from a king without first acknowledging the king’s power and sovereignty (Aj). The request for God’s help can thus be seen as a request for further aid in worshipping and serving Him and in all of one’s affairs (Aj, IK), a request founded upon the acknowledgment that one is never independent of God (Ṭb) and that it is only through His assistance that one can worship Him, not through one’s own power and strength (Bq).

Guide us upon the straight path,

6 Following upon the previous phrase, in which one asks for God’s help in servitude and obedience, guide us can be understood as a prayer for perseverence in following the straight path and thus for continued aid (Ṭ) and for being made firm in following the way of truth (Ṭs), since for those who believe and perform righteous deeds, their Lord guides them by their faith (10:9; Ṭs). The request for guidance also implies seeking to be led to God Himself and thus a desire for intimacy with Him, nearness to Him (Q), knowledge of Him, and love for Him. In this sense, it is also understood to mean, “Make our hearts incline unto Thee; direct our aspirations unto Thee; and be our guide from Thee, unto Thee, in order that we not be cut off by Thee from that which is Thine” (Bq, Su). On the intellectual level following the straight path can be understood to mean using one’s God-given intelligence correctly in order to reach the truth, rather than deviating from the straight path of thinking and intellection and thus thinking in a manner that will lead to error.

The straight path indicates a clear road with no crookedness or deviation (Ṭ). From a religious perspective, it is a middle way that avoids worldliness, on the one hand, and extreme asceticism, on the other. It thus connotes a way of life that combines the outward way of the Law with the inward way of spirituality, or the exoteric with the esoteric, so that one’s outward nature is in servitude, while one’s
inner nature is free (Aj). The Prophet is said to guide his community upon this path: (42:52–53c). The Islamic community (ummah) is thus described as a middle community (2:143) that follows a middle way in action, ethics, thought, and all aspects of life. In describing the straight path, the Prophet is reported to have said, “God has set forth a parable: a straight path that is surrounded by two walls on both sides, with several open doors within the walls covered by curtains. A caller on the gate of the path calls out, ‘O people! Stay on the path and do not deviate from it.’ Meanwhile, a caller from above the path is also warning any person who wants to open any of these doors, ‘Woe unto you! Do not open it, for if you open it you will fall through.’ The straight path is Islam, the two walls are the limits set by God, while the doors refer to what God has prohibited. The caller on the gate of the path is the Book of God, while the caller above the path is God’s admonishment present in the heart of every Muslim” (IK).

Some see the straight path as a reference to the Quran itself (Ṭ, Ṭū, Ṭs), while others say that it refers to Islam (Bq, Ṭū, Ṭs) or to the Prophet (Q). According to many Shiite commentaries, the straight path refers to the first Shiite Imam, ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (Qm, Ṭs), or to the Prophet and the Imams (Ṭū, Ṭs). In contrast, several Sunni commentaries say that it refers to the Prophet and his two Companions (Q, Ṭ), meaning the first two Caliphs, Abū Bakr (r. 10–12/632–634) and ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 12–22/634–644). Each of these interpretations indicates something that different groups of Muslims believe will assure one of being upon the straight path, as long as one follows it. To be on the straight path, or a straight path as it is usually presented in the Quran, can also be understood as walking with God to God; to God because God guides the believers unto a straight path (4:175), and with God because God Himself is upon a straight path, as when the Prophet Hūd says, Truly I trust in God, my Lord and your Lord. There is no creature that crawls, but that He holds it by its forelock. Truly my Lord is upon a straight path (11:56).

The straight path is also understood as a reference to the traverse that human beings and jinn must cross as the final stage of Judgment before entering Paradise or the Garden. According to the Prophet, this traverse is “finer than a hair and sharper than a sword”; some will pass over it like wind, and some will fly across it like birds; others will trot over it like camels. Yet others will only be able to crawl, and some will be cast from it into Hellfire; see the essay “Death, Dying, and the Afterlife in the Quran.”

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the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those who incur wrath, nor of those who are astray.
According to some accounts, this verse is in fact two verses, the first of which ends with *hast blessed* (Ṭ). The first part offers clarification regarding those who will be guided upon the *straight path*, which is further elaborated in 4:69: *Whosoever obeys God and the Messenger, they are with those whom God has blessed, the prophets, the truthful ones, the witnesses, and the righteous. What beautiful companions are they!* (Q, Ṭ, Ṭs). Those who are blessed by God are also said to be those whom God has purified, so that they are able to attain unto Him (Qu), and those whom He has blessed by causing them to be mindful of the observance of the Law and its decrees; the latter experience the realization of spiritual realities, but do not go beyond the limits of knowledge or violate any of the decrees of the Law (Qu).

*Not of* renders the exceptive particle ghayr, which is understood as being attached to *the path*. It could also be read as being attached to *them*, in which case it would mean, “The path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not those who incur wrath” (Ṭ, Ṭs). Nonetheless, both readings yield the same essential meaning (Ṭ). According to some, *those who incur wrath* are the idolaters, and *those who are astray* are the hypocrites (Q). Others relate the terms to two categories of sin in which disbelief incurs wrath and lesser sin results from being astray (M). Still others relate the terms to those who exhibit various moral shortcomings, such as those who are heedless and those who are profligate (Ni). In this sense, the two terms together can be understood as a reference to all the various degrees of those who are spiritually debased and lost and preoccupied with procuring some share of the fortunes of this world (Qu).

Regarding *those who incur wrath*, 16:106 says, *Whosoever opens his breast unto disbelief, upon them shall be the Wrath of God*, and 42:16 says of those who argue about God after having responded to Him, *their argument is baseless in the eyes of their Lord. Wrath shall be upon them, and theirs shall be a severe punishment*. In addition, 48:6 says of the hypocrites and the idolaters, *God is wroth with them, curses them, and prepares Hell for them*. God’s Wrath is also said to be upon those who murder believers (see 4:93). Regarding *those who are astray*, a far more prevalent Quranic concept, 3:90 states, *Truly those who disbelieve after having believed, then increase in disbelief, their repentance shall not be accepted, and they are the ones astray*; 2:108 states, *Whosoever exchanges belief for disbelief has gone astray from the right way*; and 4:136 declares, *Whosoever does not believe in God and His angels and His Books and His messengers and the Last Day has wandered far astray* (cf. 4:167). Addressing the psychology of being astray, 28:50 asks rhetorically, *Who is more astray than one who follows his caprice without guidance from God?*

Read in light of the many verses that refer to incurring wrath and being astray, the final verse of this sūrah can be understood as a prayer (1) to follow the way of those whom God raises in degrees (see 6:83c; 58:11c), meaning those *who believe*
and those who have been given knowledge (58:11) and those who believe and who do not obscure their belief through wrongdoing (6:82), and (2) to avoid the way of the disbelievers, some of whom are astray and with some of whom God is wroth. From one perspective, vv. 6–7 refer to the manner in which all human beings are moving toward their Lord (Tb), as in 84:6: O mankind! Truly thou art laboring unto thy Lord laboriously, and shall meet Him!; and 5:18: and unto Him is the journey’s end (cf. 2:285; 3:28; 24:42; 31:14; 35:18; 40:3; 42:15; 50:43; 60:4; 64:3). All things eventually return to God, but in various ways and by various means, as in 67:22: Is one who walks with his face stooped down more guided, or one who walks upright upon a straight path? (see also 3:83; 13:15). This verse is thus a request to be among those who proceed toward God with honor and dignity rather than with shame and disgrace.

The different qualities of the paths followed by the three categories mentioned in this verse are revealed by the different ways in which they are presented. Those whom Thou hast blessed conveys an action performed by God in the past tense, thus giving a sense of finality and certitude in that God’s blessings and favor upon them have already occurred. Those who incur wrath does not name an active agent or say definitively that the outcome has occurred, only that they are subject to wrath. This indicates that although they have already acted in a manner that may warrant Divine Punishment and Retribution, God’s Wrath has not yet come upon them and the door of repentance remains open, since God guides to Himself whosoever turns in repentance (13:27). The absence of an active agent in this phrase also reflects the general Quranic principle that God does not wrong human beings in the least, but rather human beings wrong themselves (10:44).

Being astray can result from something intentional or something done by mistake (Aj). Thus those who are astray may not have committed actions that merit Divine Retribution, as is made clear when Moses says that he was one of those who are astray (26:20) before the beginning of his mission as one of God’s messengers, and when God (using the third person instead of the first) asks the Prophet Muhammad, Did He not . . . find thee astray and guide? (93:7). In this sense, being astray describes all those who do not actively live in accord with Revelation. Given the various degrees of being astray, from those who exchange belief for disbelief (2:108) to prophets who have not yet been guided in their prophetic mission, the request to not be among those who are astray can be seen as a request for help in remembering God at all times and never acting in a manner that would be contrary to the injunctions of the Revelation.

When the straight path is understood as the vertical path of ascent toward God, those who incur wrath can be understood as a reference to those upon a path of descent away from God, while those who are astray meander horizontally away from the path that leads toward the Transcendent. These three possibilities then correspond to the three dimensions of space and symbolize all the possibilities of
the human state.

Based upon a saying attributed to the Prophet, though not considered to be of the highest degree of authenticity, one interpretation given by a number of commentators is that those who incur wrath and those who are astray refer to Jews and Christians, respectively (IK, JJ, Q, Ṭ, Z). In this vein, those who incur wrath is often connected with verses such as 2:61; 2:90; 3:112; 5:60, which speak of God’s Wrath and Anger coming upon the Children of Israel or upon the Jews. Likewise, those who are astray is often read in connection with 5:77, which warns, Follow not the caprices of a people who went astray before, and led many astray, and strayed from the right way, and is understood as a reference to Christians (Q, Ṭ, Ṭs).

According to a ḥadīth, “When the prayer leader says, Not of those who incur wrath, nor of those who are astray, you must say, Āmīn, for if one’s utterance of āmīn coincides with that of the angels, his past sins will be forgiven” (IK, Q). Upon the completion of the Fāṭiḥah, it is thus customary among Sunni Muslims to say Āmīn after a brief moment of silence, which serves to distinguish this utterance from the Quran itself (Q). It is not considered obligatory, but is reported to have been the custom of the Prophet and is strongly recommended by Sunni scholars (IK). Some advocate saying it aloud, while others recommend saying it under one’s breath (Q). Most understand āmīn to mean, “O God! Answer us,” which functions as a supplication (IK, Q). Others say that it is one of the Names of God (Q), while others say it means, “Thus shall it be” (Q). This last meaning is closest to the meaning of the Hebrew cognate “Amen.” In this sense, it is a declaration of affirmation and is understood as the seal upon one’s prayers (Q).