A late Makkan surah, al-Ārāf was reportedly revealed after Śād (Sūrah 38) and just before al-Anām (Sūrah 6). Some, however, have considered vv. 163–67 to have been revealed in Madinah (Al, IJ). The content of this surah primarily concerns the serious consequences of rejecting the signs and messengers of God. In this context, it recounts the sacred history of prophets who had been rejected by their people and the consequent suffering and destruction of these people in this world and the next. The surah takes its name from the reference to the Heights (al-Ārāf) in vv. 46 and 48, variously identified as a high place in Paradise or between Paradise and Hell.

As with al-Anām, the immediate audience for this surah is the idolatrous Makkans who refused to believe in Muhammad’s prophethood, although it takes a subtler and less polemical approach, making its argument through reference to examples from earlier prophetic history. It begins in vv. 1–10 with a reminder to follow Divine Guidance and a general warning about the consequences of failing to do so. The surah’s engagement with sacred history begins in vv. 11–27 with a recounting of the story of Adam’s creation, temptation, and exile from the Garden. It also recounts the detail of Adam and Eve sewing together leaves from the Garden to cover their newly discovered nakedness (v. 26); this narrative element is then parlayed into a discussion of the virtue and limits of earthly adornment in vv. 31–32. After another general warning about communities not accepting the prophetic messengers sent to them, vv. 44–51
present a dialogue between the people of Paradise and the people of Hell in the Hereafter, including in vv. 46–48 the somewhat cryptic mention of the inhabitants of the Heights. This is followed by a brief discourse about the various signs of God to humanity (vv. 52–58), which serves as an introduction to a lengthy segment detailing the destruction of several earlier communities who had rejected their prophets, including the peoples of the prophets Noah (vv. 59–64), Hūd (vv. 65–72), Ṣāliḥ (vv. 73–79), Lot (vv. 80–84), and Shu‘ayb (vv. 85–93).

Another lengthy narrative segment concerning Moses follows in vv. 103–56. It contains one of the Quran’s most detailed accounts of Moses’ confrontation with Pharaoh and the sorcerers (vv. 104–26), the various punishments or plagues brought upon Egypt (vv. 130–36), the eventual destruction of Pharaoh and his hosts and the deliverance of Israel (vv. 137–41), Moses receiving the Torah on the mountain (vv. 142–47), the Israelites fashioning a calf as an idol in his absence (vv. 148–54), and the subsequent covenant making with the elders of Israel (vv. 155–56). After a verse interjecting mention of the Prophet Muhammad as the “unlettered prophet” described in the Torah and Gospel (v. 157), the sūrah continues with a discussion of the Israelites’ later disobedience and the future punishments they are said to suffer as a result (vv. 159–71). The various accounts of previous prophets and peoples then concludes in v. 172 with mention of the universal, pretemporal covenant between God and all human beings obligating them to recognize God’s Lordship, which is thus understood to be the basis of all future covenants between God and humanity as mediated through the prophets.

The final section repeats the warnings about denying the signs of God and persisting in idolatry (vv. 174–98) and then concludes with several verses dealing with pious and devotional practices, including invoking the Names of God and listening to the recitation of the Quran (vv. 180, 204–5).

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

1 Alif. Lām. Mīm. Šād. 2 [This is] a Book sent down unto thee—so let there be no constriction in thy breast
because of it—that thou mayest warn thereby, and a Reminder for the believers. 3 Follow that which has been sent down unto you from your Lord, and follow not any protectors apart from Him. Little do you reflect! 4 How many a town have We destroyed! Our Might came upon them by night, or while they took their ease at midday. 5 Their plea, when Our Might came upon them, was but to say, “Truly we were wrongdoers.” 6 Then We shall surely question those unto whom Our message was sent, and We shall surely question the messengers. 7 Then We shall recount unto them with knowledge, for We were never absent. 8 And the weighing on that Day is true. So those whose balance is heavy, it is they who shall prosper. 9 And as for those whose balance is light, it is they who have ruined their souls by having treated Our signs wrongfully. 10 And We have indeed established you upon the earth and placed means of livelihood for you therein. Little do you give thanks! 11 Indeed, We created you, then We formed you, then We said unto the angels, “Prostrate yourselves before Adam.” And they all prostrated, save Iblīs; he was not among those who prostrated. 12 He said, “What prevented thee from prostrating when I commanded thee?” He said, “I am better than him. Thou hast created me from fire, while Thou hast created him from clay.” 13 He said, “Get down from it! It is not for thee to wax arrogant here. So go forth! Thou art surely among those who are humbled.” 14 He said, “Grant me respite till the Day they are resurrected.” 15 He said, “Truly thou art among those granted respite.” 16 He said, “Because Thou hast caused
me to err, I shall surely lie in wait for them on Thy straight path. 17 Then I shall come upon them from in front of them and from behind them, and from their right and from their left. And Thou wilt not find most of them thankful.” 18 He said, “Go forth from it, disgraced and banished! Whosoever among them follows you, I shall surely fill Hell with you all.” 19 “O Adam! Dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden, and eat from wheresoever you two will, but approach not this tree, lest you two be among the wrongdoers.” 20 Then Satan whispered to them, that he might expose to them that which was hidden from them of their nakedness. And he said, “Your Lord has only forbidden you this tree, lest you should become angels, or among those who abide [forever].” 21 And he swore unto them, “Truly I am a sincere adviser unto you.” 22 Thus he lured them on through deception. And when they tasted of the tree, their nakedness was exposed to them, and they began to sew together the leaves of the Garden to cover themselves. And their Lord called out to them, “Did I not forbid you from that tree, and tell you that Satan is a manifest enemy unto you?” 23 They said, “Our Lord! We have wronged ourselves. If Thou dost not forgive us and have Mercy upon us, we shall surely be among the losers.” 24 He said, “Get down, each of you an enemy to the other! There will be for you on earth a dwelling place, and enjoyment for a while.” 25 He said, “Therein you shall live, and therein you shall die, and from there shall you be brought forth.” 26 O Children of Adam! We have indeed sent down upon you raiment to cover your nakedness, and rich adornment. But
the raiment of reverence, that is better. This is among the signs of God, that haply they may remember. 27 O Children of Adam! Let not Satan tempt you, as he caused your parents to go forth from the Garden, stripping them of their raiment to show them their nakedness. Surely he sees you—he and his tribe—whence you see them not. We have indeed made the satans the friends of those who do not believe. 28 When they commit an indecency, they say, “We found our fathers practicing it, and God has commanded us thus.” Say, “Truly God commands not indecency. Do you say of God that which you know not?” 29 Say, “My Lord has commanded justice. So set your faces [toward Him] at every place of prayer, and call upon Him, devoting religion entirely to Him. Just as He originated you, so shall you return.” 30 Some He has rightly guided, and some are deserving of error. Truly they took satans as their protectors apart from God and deem them rightly guided. 31 O Children of Adam! Put on your adornment at every place of worship, and eat and drink, but be not prodigal. Truly He loves not the prodigal. 32 Say, “Who has forbidden the adornment of God, which He has brought forth for His servants, and the good things among [His] provision?” Say, “These are for those who believe, in the life of this world, and on the Day of Resurrection they are for them alone.” Thus do We expound the signs for a people who know. 33 Say, “My Lord has only forbidden indecencies—both outward and inward—and sin, and tyranny without right, and that you should ascribe partners unto God, for which He has sent down no authority,
that you should say of God that which you know not.”

And for every community there is a term appointed. When their term comes, they shall not delay it by a single hour, nor shall they advance it. O Children of Adam! Should there come unto you messengers from among yourselves, recounting My signs unto you, then whosoever is reverent and makes amends, no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve. But those who deny Our signs and treat them with disdain, it is they who are the inhabitants of the Fire. They shall abide therein. And who does greater wrong than one who fabricates a lie against God or denies His signs? For such as these, their portion of the book will reach them, till, when Our messengers come to take them away, they will say, “Where is that which you used to call upon apart from God?” They will respond, “They have forsaken us.” And they bear witness against themselves that they were disbelievers. He will say, “Enter the Fire among communities of jinn and men that have passed away before you!” Every time a community enters, it curses its sister, till, when they have all successively arrived there, the last of them will say of the first of them, “Our Lord, it was they who led us astray; so give them a double punishment in the Fire.” He will say, “For each of you it shall be doubled, but you know not.” And the first of them will say to the last of them, “You are no better than us; so taste the punishment for that which you have earned.” Truly those who deny Our signs and wax arrogant against them, the gates of Heaven shall not be opened for them, nor shall they enter the Garden till the camel pass through the eye of
the needle. Thus do We recompense the guilty! Hell shall be their resting place, with coverings above them. And thus do We recompense the wrongdoers! As for those who believe and perform righteous deeds—We task no soul beyond its capacity—it is they who are the inhabitants of the Garden; they shall abide therein. And We shall remove whatever rancor lies within their breasts. Rivers shall run below them. And they will say, “Praise be to God, Who guided us unto this. We would not have been rightly guided, had God not guided us. The messengers of our Lord certainly brought the truth.” And a call will be made unto them, “This is the Garden. You have inherited it for that which you used to do.” The inhabitants of the Garden will call out to the inhabitants of the Fire, “We have found that which our Lord promised us to be true. Have you found that which your Lord promised to be true?” They will respond, “Yes.” Thereupon a herald shall proclaim in their midst, “The curse of God be upon the wrongdoers!” Those who turn from the way of God and seek to make it crooked, disbelieving in the Hereafter. And there will be a veil between them. And upon the Heights are men who know all by their marks. They will call out to the inhabitants of the Garden, “Peace be upon you!” They will not have entered it, though they hope. And when their eyes turn toward the inhabitants of the Fire, they will say, “Our Lord! Place us not among the wrongdoing people!” And the inhabitants of the Heights will call out to men whom they know by their marks, “Your accumulating has not availed you, nor has your waxing
arrogant. Are these the ones concerning whom you swore that God would not extend any mercy?” “Enter the Garden! No fear shall come upon you, nor shall you grieve.” The inhabitants of the Fire will call out to the inhabitants of the Garden, “Pour some water down upon us, or some of that which God has provided you.” They will respond, “Truly God has forbidden them both to the disbelievers,” who took their religion to be diversion and play, and were deluded by the life of this world. So this Day We forget them, as they forgot the meeting with this Day of theirs, and as they used to reject Our signs. We have indeed brought them a Book, which We have expounded with knowledge, as a guidance and a mercy for a people who believe. Do they wait for aught save the full disclosure thereof? The Day when its full disclosure comes, those who forgot it beforehand will say, “The messengers of our Lord indeed brought the truth! Have we any intercessors who might intercede for us? Or might we be returned, that we might do other than what we used to do?” They have surely lost their souls, and that which they used to fabricate has forsaken them. Truly your Lord is God, Who created the heavens and the earth in six days, then mounted the Throne. He causes the night to cover the day, which pursues it swiftly; and the sun, the moon, and the stars are made subservient by His Command. Do not creation and command belong to Him? Blessed is God, Lord of the worlds! Call upon your Lord humbly and in secret. Truly He loves not the transgressors. And work not corruption upon the earth after it has been set aright,
but call upon Him in fear and in hope. Surely the Mercy of God is ever nigh unto the virtuous. 57 He it is Who sends the winds as glad tidings ahead of His Mercy, so that when they bear heavy-laden clouds, We may drive them toward a land that is dead, and send down water upon it, and thereby bring forth every kind of fruit. Thus shall We bring forth the dead, that haply you may remember. 58 As for the good land, its vegetation comes forth by the leave of its Lord. And as for the bad, it comes forth but sparsely. Thus do We vary the signs for a people who give thanks. 59 Indeed, We sent Noah unto his people, and he said, “O my people! Worship God! You have no god other than Him. Truly I fear for you the punishment of a tremendous day!” 60 The notables among his people said, “Truly we think that you are in manifest error.” 61 He said, “O my people! There is no error in me, but rather I am a messenger from the Lord of the worlds. 62 I deliver unto you the messages of my Lord, and advise you sincerely, and I know from God what you know not. 63 Or do you marvel that a reminder from your Lord should come unto you by means of a man from among yourselves, so as to warn you, that you might be reverent, and that haply you may receive mercy?” 64 Yet they denied him. So We saved him and those who were with him in the Ark, and We drowned those who denied Our signs. Truly they were a blind people. 65 And unto Ād, their brother, Hūd. He said, “O my people! Worship God! You have no god other than Him. Will you not be reverent?” 66 The notables among his people who disbelieved said, “Truly we think that you are foolish, and
we consider you to be among the liars.” 67 He said, “O my people! There is no foolishness in me, but rather I am a messenger from the Lord of the worlds. 68 I deliver unto you the messages of my Lord, and truly I am a trustworthy adviser unto you. 69 Or do you marvel that a reminder from your Lord should come to you by means of a man from among yourselves, so as to warn you? Remember when He made you vicegerents after the people of Noah, and increased you amply in stature. So remember the boons of God, that haply you may prosper.” 70 They said, “Have you come unto us so that we may worship God alone, and leave aside what our fathers worshipped? Then bring upon us that wherewith you have threatened us, if you are truthful.” 71 He said, “Defilement and wrath have already come upon you from your Lord. Do you dispute with me over names that you have named—you and your fathers—for which God has sent down no authority? Then wait! Truly I am waiting along with you.” 72 So We saved him and those who were with him through a mercy from Us, and We cut off the last remnant of those who denied Our signs and were not believers. 73 And unto Thamūd, their brother, Šāliḥ. He said, “O my people! Worship God! You have no god other than Him. There has come unto you a clear proof from your Lord. This she-camel of God is a sign unto you. Leave her to graze freely on God’s earth, and cause her no harm, lest a painful punishment seize you. 74 Remember when He made you vicegerents after ʿĀd and settled you on the earth: you build castles for yourselves on the open plain and hew dwellings in the mountains. So remember the
boons of God, and behave not wickedly upon the earth, working corruption.” 75 The notables among his people who were arrogant said to those among them who believed and whom they deemed weak, “Do you know that Ṣāliḥ has been sent by his Lord?” They said, “Truly we believe in that wherewith he has been sent.” 76 Those who were arrogant said, “Truly we believe not in that which you believe.” 77 So they hamstrung the she-camel and insolently defied the Command of their Lord. And they said, “O Ṣāliḥ! Bring upon us that wherewith you have threatened us, if you are among those sent [by God].” 78 So the earthquake seized them, and morning found them lying lifeless in their abode. 79 So he turned away from them and said, “O my people! I indeed delivered unto you the message of my Lord, and advised you sincerely, but you love not sincere advisers.” 80 And Lot, when he said to his people, “What! Do you commit an indecency such as none in the world committed before you? 81 Verily you come with desire unto men instead of women. Indeed, you are a prodigal people!” 82 And the reply of his people was but to say, “Expel them from your town! Truly they are a people who keep themselves pure.” 83 So We saved him and his family, except for his wife; she was among those who lagged behind. 84 And We sent down a rain upon them; so behold how the guilty fared in the end. 85 And unto Midian, their brother, Shuʿayb. He said, “O my people! Worship God! You have no god other than Him. There has come unto you a clear proof from your Lord. So observe fully the measure and the balance and diminish not
people’s goods, nor work corruption upon the earth after it has been set aright. That is better for you, if you are believers. And do not lie in wait on every path, threatening and turning away those who believe in Him from the way of God, and seeking to make it crooked. And remember when you were few, and He made you many. And behold how the workers of corruption fared in the end! If a group of you believe in that wherewith I have been sent, and a group of you believe not, then be patient till God shall judge between us, and He is the best of judges.”

The notables among his people who were arrogant said, “We shall surely expel you, O Shu‘ayb, and those who believe along with you from our town, unless you revert to our creed.” He said, “What! Even though we are unwilling? We would be fabricating a lie against God were we to revert to your creed after God had delivered us from it. It is not for us to revert thereto unless God, our Lord, should will. Our Lord encompasses all things in knowledge. In God do we trust. Our Lord! Decide between us and our people in truth, and Thou art the best of deciders.”

The notables among his people who disbelieved said, “Verily if you follow Shu‘ayb, you shall surely be the losers.” So the earthquake seized them, and morning found them lying lifeless in their abode. Those who denied Shu‘ayb, it was as though they had never dwelt there. Those who denied Shu‘ayb, they themselves were the losers. So he turned away from them and said, “O my people! I indeed delivered unto you the messages of my Lord, and advised you sincerely. So how can I grieve for a disbelieving
people?” We sent no prophet to a town but that We seized its people with misfortune and hardship, that haply they would humble themselves. Then We replaced evil [circumstances] with good, till they multiplied and said, “Hardship and ease visited our fathers [as well].” Then We seized them suddenly, while they were unaware. Had the people of the towns believed and been reverent, We would surely have opened unto them blessings from Heaven and earth. But they denied, so We seized them for that which they used to earn. Did the people of the towns feel secure from Our Might coming upon them by night, while they were sleeping? Or did the people of the towns feel secure from Our Might coming upon them in broad daylight, while they were playing? Did they feel secure from God’s plotting? None feels secure from God’s plotting, save the people who are losers. Does it not serve as guidance unto those who inherited the earth after its [earlier] inhabitants that, if We willed, We could smite them for their sins and set a seal upon their hearts such that they would not hear? These are the towns whose stories We have recounted unto thee. Their messengers certainly brought them clear proofs, but they would not believe in what they had denied earlier. Thus does God set a seal upon the hearts of the disbelievers. We did not find most of them [faithful to their] pact. Indeed, We found most of them to be iniquitous. Then after them We sent Moses with Our signs unto Pharaoh and his notables, but they treated them wrongfully; so behold how the workers of corruption fared in the end. And Moses said, “O
Pharaoh! I am truly a messenger from the Lord of the worlds, obligated to speak naught about God save the truth. I have brought you a clear proof from your Lord; so send forth with me the Children of Israel.” He said, “If you have brought a sign, then bring it forth, if you are among the truthful.” So he cast his staff and, behold, it was a serpent manifest. And he drew forth his hand and, behold, it was white to the onlookers. The notables among Pharaoh’s people said, “Truly this is a knowledgeable sorcerer. He desires to expel you from your land; so what do you command?” They said, “Put him and his brother off for a while, and send marshalers to the cities to bring you every knowledgeable sorcerer.” And the sorcerers came unto Pharaoh. They said, “We shall surely have a reward if it is we who are victorious.” He said, “Yes, and indeed you shall be among those brought nigh.” They said, “O Moses! either you cast, or we will be the ones who cast.” He said, “Cast!” And when they cast, they bewitched the eyes of the people and struck them with awe, and they brought forth a mighty sorcery. And We revealed unto Moses, “Cast thy staff!” And behold, it devoured all their deceptions. Thus the truth came to pass, and whatsoever they did was shown to be false. Then and there they were vanquished and turned back, humbled. And the sorcerers were cast down prostrate. They said, “We believe in the Lord of the worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron.” Pharaoh said, “You believe in him before I grant you leave! This is surely a plot you have devised in the city, that you might
expel its people therefrom. Soon you shall know. I shall surely cut off your hands and your feet on alternate sides; then I shall surely crucify you all!” They said, “Truly we turn unto our Lord. You take vengeance upon us only because we believed in the signs of our Lord when they came unto us. Our Lord, shower us with patience, and let us die as submitters.” The notables among Pharaoh’s people said, “Will you leave Moses and his people to work corruption in the land and to leave you and your gods?” He said, “We shall slay their sons and spare their women. Truly we are above them, dominant.” Moses said unto his people, “Seek help from God and be patient. Truly the land belongs to God; He bequeaths it to whomsoever He will among His servants. And the end belongs to the reverent.” They said, “We were persecuted before you came to us, and after you came to us.” He said, “It may be that your Lord will destroy your enemies and make you vicegerents upon the earth, that He may observe how you behave.” And We indeed afflicted the House of Pharaoh with drought and a shortage of crops, that haply they would be reminded. But whenever good came to them, they would say, “This is ours.” And if an evil befell them, they would consider it an ill omen on account of Moses and those who were with him. Nay, their ill omen lies with God, though most of them know not. And they said, “Whatever sign you may bring to bewitch us thereby, we will not believe in you.” So We sent against them the flood and the locusts, and the lice and the frogs and the blood—signs expounded. But they waxed arrogant, and
they were a guilty people. And when the torment came down upon them, they said, “O Moses! Call upon your Lord for us by the covenant He has made with you. If you lift this torment from us, we shall surely believe in you, and we shall surely send forth the Children of Israel with you.” But when We lifted the torment from them, for a term they were to fulfill, behold, they reneged. So We took vengeance upon them and drowned them in the sea for their having denied Our signs and for having been heedless of them. And We bequeathed unto the people who were oppressed the eastern and western parts of the land that We blessed. And the most beautiful Word of thy Lord was fulfilled for the Children of Israel because they were patient. And We demolished all that Pharaoh and his people had wrought and that which they used to build. And We brought the Children of Israel across the sea, and they came upon a people clinging to their idols. They said, “O Moses! Make for us a god as they have gods.” He said, “Truly you are an ignorant people! As for these, what they practice shall perish, and vain is that which they used to do.” He said, “Shall I seek for you a god other than God, when He has favored you above the worlds?” And when We saved you from the House of Pharaoh, who inflicted terrible punishment upon you, slaying your sons and sparing your women. And in this was a great trial from your Lord. And We appointed for Moses thirty nights, and We completed them with ten [more]; thus was completed the appointed term of his Lord: forty nights. And Moses said unto his brother, Aaron, “Take my place
among my people, set matters aright, and follow not the way of those who work corruption.”

And when Moses came to Our appointed meeting and his Lord spoke unto him, he said, “My Lord, show me, that I might look upon Thee.” He said, “Thou shalt not see Me; but look upon the mountain: if it remains firm in its place, then thou wilt see Me.” And when his Lord manifested Himself to the mountain, He made it crumble to dust, and Moses fell down in a swoon. And when he recovered, he said, “Glory be to Thee! I turn unto Thee in repentance, and I am the first of the believers.”

He said, “O Moses! Verily I have chosen thee above mankind through My messages and My speaking [unto thee]. So take that which I have given thee, and be among the thankful.”

And We wrote for him upon the Tablets an exhortation concerning all things, and an elaboration of all things. “Take hold of them with strength, and command thy people to hold to the best of them. Soon I shall show thee the abode of the iniquitous.”

I shall turn away from My signs those who wax arrogant upon the earth without right. Even if they were to see every sign, they would not believe in them. And if they were to see the way of sound judgment, they would not take it as a way, but if they were to see the way of error, they would take it as a way. That is because they denied Our signs and were heedless of them. As for those who deny Our signs and the meeting of the Hereafter, their deeds have come to naught. Are they recompensed for aught save that which they used to do?

And while he was away, the people of Moses took a calf [made] from their ornaments—a body
that lowed. Did they not consider that it spoke not unto them, nor guided them to any way? They took it up, and they were wrongdoers. And when they wrung their hands and saw that they had gone astray, they said, “If our Lord does not have mercy upon us and forgive us, we shall surely be among the losers!” And when Moses returned unto his people angry and aggrieved, he said, “How evil is the course you have followed after me! Would you hasten the Command of your Lord?” And he cast down the Tablets and seized his brother by the head, dragging him toward himself. He said, “Son of my mother! Truly the people deemed me weak, and they were about to kill me. So let not the enemies rejoice in my misfortune, and place me not with the wrongdoing people.” He said, “My Lord, forgive me and my brother and bring us into Thy Mercy, for Thou art the most Merciful of the merciful.”

As for those who took up the calf, anger from their Lord shall seize them, and abasement in the life of this world. Thus do We recompense those who fabricate. But as for those who commit evil deeds and then repent thereafter and believe, surely, thereafter, thy Lord is Forgiving, Merciful.

And when the anger abated from Moses, he took up the Tablets; and in their inscription lay a guidance and a mercy for those who are in awe of their Lord. And Moses chose seventy men from his people for Our meeting. And when the earthquake seized them, he said, “My Lord! Hadst Thou willed, Thou wouldst have destroyed them and me beforehand. Wilt Thou destroy us for that which the fools among us have done? It is naught but Thy trial, whereby
Thou leadest astray whomsoever Thou wilt, and guidest whomsoever Thou wilt. Thou art our Protector, so forgive us and have mercy upon us, and Thou art the best of forgivers!

And prescribe good for us in the life of this world, and in the Hereafter; truly we have turned unto Thee.” He said, “I cause My Punishment to smite whomsoever I will, though My Mercy encompasses all things. I shall prescribe it for those who are reverent, and give alms, and those who believe in Our signs, those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, whom they find inscribed in the Torah and the Gospel that is with them, who enjoins upon them what is right, and forbids them what is wrong, and makes good things lawful for them, and forbids them bad things, and relieves them of their burden and the shackles that were upon them. Thus those who believe in him, honor him, help him, and follow the light that has been sent down with him; it is they who shall prosper.”

Say, “O mankind! Truly I am the Messenger of God unto you all—Him to Whom belongs Sovereignty over the heavens and the earth. There is no god but He. He gives life and causes death. So believe in God and His Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, who believes in God and His Words; and follow him, that haply you may be guided.” And among the people of Moses is a community that guides by the truth and does justice thereby. And We divided them into twelve tribes, communities. And We revealed to Moses, when his people asked him for water, “Strike the rock with thy staff.” Then twelve springs gushed forth from it: all the people knew
their drinking place. And We shaded them with clouds, and sent down manna and quails upon them, “Eat of the good things We have provided you.” And they wronged Us not, but themselves did they wrong. And when it was said unto them, “Settle in this town, and eat of that which is therein wheresoever you will, and say, ‘Remove the burden!’ And enter the gate prostrating, that We may forgive you your iniquities. We shall increase the virtuous.”

Then those among them who did wrong substituted a word other than that which had been said unto them. So We sent down upon them a torment from heaven for the wrong they used to do. And ask them about the town that was by the sea, when they transgressed the Sabbath. Their fish would come to them, surfacing on the day of their Sabbath, but on the day when they did not observe the Sabbath, they would not come to them. Thus did We try them for their having been iniquitous.

And when a community among them said, “Why do you admonish a people whom God is about to destroy or punish with a severe punishment?” They said, “As an excuse before your Lord, and that haply they may be reverent.” And when they forgot that whereof they had been reminded, We saved those who forbade evil, and We seized those who did wrong with a dreadful punishment for their having committed iniquity. When they were insolent concerning that which they had been forbidden, We said unto them, “Be you apes, outcast.” And when thy Lord proclaimed that He would surely send against them, till the Day of Resurrection, those who would inflict upon them a
terrible punishment. Truly thy Lord is swift in retribution, and truly He is Forgiving, Merciful. And We divided them into communities on the earth: some of them are righteous and some are otherwise. And We tried them with good things and with evil things, that haply they would return. Then a generation succeeded them who inherited the Book. They grasp the ephemeralities of this lower world and say, “It will be forgiven us.” And if other ephemeralities like them were to come their way, they would grasp them [also]. Did not the covenant of the Book commit them to say naught of God save the truth? They have studied what is in it. And the Abode of the Hereafter is better for those who are reverent. Will you not understand? As for those who cling to the Book and perform the prayer—surely We neglect not the reward of the workers of righteousness. And when We lifted the mountain above them, as if it were a canopy, and they thought it would fall upon them, “Take hold of that which We have given you with strength, and remember what is therein, that haply you may be reverent.” And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their progeny and made them bear witness concerning themselves, “Am I not your Lord?” they said, “Yea, we bear witness”—lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, “Truly of this we were heedless,” or lest you should say, “[It is] only that our fathers ascribed partners unto God beforehand, and we were their progeny after them. Wilt Thou destroy us for that which the falsifiers have done?” Thus do We expound the signs, that haply they may
And recite unto them the account of the one to whom We gave Our signs, but he cast them off. So Satan made him his follower, and he became one of the deviant. Had We willed, We would surely have elevated him thereby, but he inclined toward the earth and followed his caprice. Thus his parable is that of a dog: if you attack him, he lolls out his tongue, and if you leave him alone, he lolls out his tongue. That is the likeness of the people who deny Our signs. So recount the stories, that haply they may reflect. Evil is the parable of the people who denied Our signs and wronged themselves. Whomsoever God guides, he is rightly guided; and whomsoever He leads astray, it is they who are the losers. We have indeed created for Hell many among jinn and men: they have hearts with which they understand not; they have eyes with which they see not; and they have ears with which they hear not. Such as these are like cattle. Nay, they are even further astray. It is they who are heedless. Unto God belong the Most Beautiful Names; so call Him by them, and leave those who deviate with regard to His Names. Soon they shall be recompensed for that which they used to do. And among those We have created, there is a community that guides by the truth and does justice thereby. And as for those who deny Our signs, We shall lead them on little by little, whence they know not. And I will grant them respite; truly My scheme is firm. Have they not reflected? There is no madness in their companion. He is naught but a clear warner. Or have they not contemplated the dominion of the heavens and the earth,
and what things God has created, and that their term may already have drawn nigh? So in what discourse after this will they believe? Whomsoever God leads astray, no guide has he. And He leaves them to wander confused in their rebellion. They question thee about the Hour, when it will set in. Say, “Knowledge thereof lies only with my Lord. None save He shall manifest it at its proper time. Heavy shall it weigh upon the heavens and the earth. It shall not come upon you but suddenly.” They question thee as if thou knew it well. Say, “Knowledge thereof lies only with God, but most of mankind know not.” Say, “I have no power over what benefit or harm may come to me, save as God wills. Had I knowledge of the unseen, I would have acquired much good, and no evil would have touched me. I am naught save a warner and a bearer of glad tidings unto a people who believe. He it is Who created you from a single soul, and made from it its mate, that he might find rest in her. Then, when he covered her, she bore a light burden, and carried it about. But when she had grown heavy, they called upon God, their Lord, “If Thou giveth us a healthy child, we shall surely be among the thankful.” Then, when He gave them a healthy child, they ascribed partners unto Him with regard to that which He had given them. Exalted is God above the partners they ascribe. Do they ascribe as partners those who created naught and are themselves created? Those who can neither help them, nor help themselves? And if you call them to guidance, they follow you not. It is the same for you whether you call them or whether you remain silent.
Truly those whom they call upon apart from God are servants like you. So call upon them! Let them answer you, if you are truthful. Have they feet with which they walk? Have they hands with which they grasp? Have they eyes with which they perceive? Have they ears with which they hear? Say, “Call upon your partners, then scheme against me, and grant me no respite. Truly my Protector is God, Who sent down the Book, and He protects the righteous. And those whom you call upon apart from Him can neither help you, nor help themselves.” If thou callest them unto guidance, they hear not. Thou seest them looking upon thee, but they see not. Take to pardoning, and enjoin right, and turn away from the ignorant. And should a temptation from Satan provoke thee, seek refuge in God. Truly He is Hearing, Knowing. Truly those who are reverent, when they are touched by a visitation from Satan, they remember; then behold, they see. But as for their brethren, they draw them ever further into error, and then they cease not. And when thou bringest them not a sign, they say, “Why do you not choose it?” Say, “I only follow that which is revealed unto me from my Lord. These are insights from your Lord, and a guidance and a mercy for a people who believe.” And when the Quran is recited, hearken unto it, and listen, that haply you may receive mercy. And remember thy Lord within thy soul, humbly and in awe, being not loud of voice, in the morning and the evening, and be not among those who are heedless. Surely those who are with thy Lord are not too arrogant to worship Him. And they glorify Him, and prostrate unto
Him.

**Commentary**


1 The four Arabic letters at the beginning of this *sūrah* are among the “separated letters” (*al-muqāṭṭa‘āt*) found at the beginning of twenty-nine *sūrah*s. Among them, this is the only *sūrah* that begins with these particular letters. Although the meaning of these letters is considered ambiguous by many commentators, some have speculated that the letters at the beginning of this *sūrah* may be a Name of God, that they stand for the “greatest Name of God,” or that they are a name for the Quran itself (Ṭ). For a fuller discussion of the separated letters, see 2:1c.

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2. [This is] a Book sent down unto thee—so let there be no constriction in thy breast because of it—that thou mayest warn thereby, and a Reminder for the believers.

2 As with most instances of the “separated letters,” those in v. 1 are immediately followed by a mention of the *Book*, meaning the Quran, or perhaps this *sūrah* in particular (R, Z). *Let there be no constriction in thy breast because of it* is addressed to the Prophet, indicating that he should feel no doubt (Ṭ) or anxiety over proclaiming the Quran, for the Book was *sent down* so that the Prophet might *warn thereby* (R, Ṭ). The doubt or anxiety the Prophet might experience would not be about the truth of the revelation, but rather about the response he might receive from his people when he “warns them thereby.” *Reminder* (*dhikrā*) is used here to refer to the Quran specifically (see also 20:3; 36:69), although it is used elsewhere to refer to various kinds of Divine reminders, and in 40:54 it is used to describe the scripture given to Moses.

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3. Follow that which has been sent down unto you from
your Lord, and follow not any protectors apart from Him. Little do you reflect!

3 The previous verse addressed the Prophet, but the present verse is addressed to the Prophet’s community or to people in general (R). That which has been sent down unto you from your Lord is a reference to the Quran. The warning not to follow or obey (JJ) any other protectors apart from God is similar to those in several other verses, including those that state that one has no protector other than God (e.g., 6:51; 11:20; 13:11; 18:26; 29:22; 32:4) and those that mention the disbelievers taking idols (2:257) or satans (7:30; 18:50) as their protectors (R, Z). The protectors here might also be a reference to the early Companions’ other associates and friends who would incite them to polytheism and idolatry (Ṭ, Z). See also 29:41: The parable of those who take protectors apart from God is that of the spider that makes a house. Truly the frailest of houses is the spider’s house, if they but knew. The phrase follow not any protectors apart from Him might also be rendered “follow not any protectors apart from it” meaning, apart from that which has been sent down unto you (R, Z). Little do you reflect is a rebuke also found in 27:62; 40:58; 69:42; see 69:41–42c.

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4 How many a town have We destroyed! Our Might came upon them by night, or while they took their ease at midday.

5 Their plea, when Our Might came upon them, was but to say, “Truly we were wrongdoers.”

4–5 Towns destroyed for their wrongdoing are mentioned by way of warning throughout the Quran, and vv. 59–136 of this sūrah contain the first of several lengthy passages in the Quran that recount the fate of successive disbelieving towns or cities (here beginning with the people of Noah and ending with the people of Pharaoh) who rejected their messengers; other accounts of the destroyed towns can be found in 11:25–100; 26:105–89; 27:45–58; 54:9–42. That God’s punishment came upon them by night, or while they took their ease at midday means that once God has warned people through His messengers, Divine chastisement for those who reject the message may come not only after death, but also in this world at any time, and it may come without further warning (cf. v. 97). The Quran sometimes
presents disbelievers as denying or excusing their error once they have been called to account (4:97; 6:23–24; 16:28) or admitting their wrongdoing after it is too late for repentance (21:46; 23:106; 26:97; 40:85; 68:29–31; 74:43–47).

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6 Then We shall surely question those unto whom Our message was sent, and We shall surely question the messengers.

7 Then We shall recount unto them with knowledge, for We were never absent.

6–7 After the punishment has come, those who were the recipients of God’s message—that is, revelation and particularly the prophetic warning—will be questioned about their response (JJ, T). Although several verses mention that people will be questioned at the Final Judgment (16:56, 93; 17:36; 29:13; 43:44), elsewhere the Quran states that the guilty will not be questioned about their sins (28:78) and that on that Day no man shall be questioned as to his sins, nor shall any jinn (55:39). Al-Rāzī resolves this apparent contradiction by asserting that although people will not be questioned regarding their actions as such—for God already has knowledge of their actions, which are also already recorded in the book of their deeds that they will each receive in the Hereafter (see, e.g., 17:71; 69:19)—they will be questioned about why they have done these evil deeds and about what turned them away from good ones (R). Commentators also note that the questioning in v. 6 is done as a means of rebuke (R, T, Z). The messengers will also be questioned, but only about their delivery of the message (JJ, T), for the Quran indicates that the duty of the Prophet (as with all prophets) is simply to deliver the message (3:20; 5:92, 99; 13:40; 16:35, 82; 29:18); the reaction of the people to the message is a matter beyond the Prophet’s control and thus something for which he is not accountable.

After questioning the people about their response to His messages and warnings and the prophets’ delivery thereof, God shall recount to them their deeds with knowledge, since He has knowledge of both their inward and outward, public and private acts (Z). In a hadīth the Prophet says, “There is not one of you to whom his Lord will not speak without an interpreter between them on the Day of Resurrection. And He will say to him, ‘Do you remember the day on which you did this and did that?’ so that He may remind him of what he did in the world” (T). In many verses throughout the Quran, it is said that on the Day of Judgment God will
“inform” people about their actions in this life; see 5:14, 105; 6:60, 108, 159; 9:94, 105; 10:23; 24:64; 29:8; 31:15, 23; 39:7; 41:50; 58:6–7; 62:8; 64:7; 75:13. If God’s recounting of people’s earthly deeds indicates His Omniscience, the subsequent statement that God was never absent indicates His Omnipresence and Immanence. See also 57:4: And He is with you wheresoever you are, and God sees whatsoever you do.

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8 And the weighing on that Day is true. So those whose balance is heavy, it is they who shall prosper.

9 And as for those whose balance is light, it is they who have ruined their souls by having treated Our signs wrongfully.

8–9 The weighing on that Day refers to the “weighing” of every individual’s deeds and the judgment rendered upon them on the Last Day. The “weighing” is true in that it is just (Ṭ). The balance is heavy for those who have accumulated many good deeds or for those whose good deeds outweigh bad ones (Ṭ), while the balance is light (v. 9) for those whose evil deeds have outweighed good ones. A ḥadīth says, “Nothing is heavier in the balance than good character (husn al-khuluq)” (Ṭ); and another indicates that belief in the One God and in the prophethood of Muhammad outweighs even a vast record of error and sin (R).

The image of a balance weighing good and evil deeds is used in other Quranic passages as a metaphor for Divine Judgment (21:47; 23:102–3; 101:6–9). This image is consistent with repeated Quranic injunctions to weigh with justice and integrity in commercial transactions (cf. 6:152; 7:85; 11:84–85; 17:35; 26:182–83; 55:8–9) as well as with the larger Quranic theme that God creates all things “in due balance” and thus “sets [or sends down] the balance” (al-mīzān) for everything in the created order (15:18; 42:17; 55:7; 57:25). When considered together with these other Quranic themes, the representation of judgment as the weighing of deeds in a balance suggests the existence of a universal “balance” that is in the nature of all things in the cosmos, forming the basis of just and equitable human transactions in this world and according to which all human actions will be measured and recompensed in the next.

Like the questioning of individuals mentioned in v. 6, the weighing of deeds in scales should not be understood to mean that God needs a source of information or judgment outside Himself in order to know how individual human beings should be
judged. Rather, it is intended to serve as a form of rebuke that forces wrongdoers to acknowledge their wrongdoing and surrender all attempts to excuse their actions (Z); the “balance” also serves to assure human beings that they have not been wronged, since all deeds are weighed according to the same scale.

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10 And We have indeed established you upon the earth and placed means of livelihood for you therein. Little do you give thanks!

10 This verse is addressed to people generally. God has established (makkannā) them upon the earth may mean that He has given them a dwelling place on the earth (Ţ; cf. 2:36; 6:98; 7:24), but also that He has given or delegated to them a certain power in the world (JJ). This verse serves as an introduction to the story of Adam’s creation and fall that immediately follows, and at the end of two separate Quranic accounts of this same incident God mentions that He is establishing a dwelling for human beings on the earth (2:36; 7:24).

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11 Indeed, We created you, then We formed you, then We said unto the angels, “Prostrate yourselves before Adam.” And they all prostrated, save Iblīs; he was not among those who prostrated.

11–25 The narrative in these verses represents the second account (in the textual order of the Quran) of Adam’s creation, temptation, and banishment; the first account is found in 2:30–39, and later accounts in 17:61–65 and 20:115–24. See also 15:28–43 and 38:71–85, where a similar account is told of the creation and fall of the first human being, but without specific reference to Adam.

11 We created you, then We formed you is addressed to all human beings, who are considered to have been originally created along with Adam as the seed in his loins. As such, all human beings can be understood as having participated in the events of the narrative that follows and in the nobility God bestows upon Adam, and are thus subject to the commands and the warnings issued to him. See v. 172, where all human beings bear witness to God’s Lordship in a pretemporal covenant: And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their
progeny and made them bear witness concerning themselves, “Am I not your Lord?” they said, “Yea, we bear witness.” In the present verse, We created you is understood as referring to mankind’s creation as a whole through the creation of Adam, and then We formed you refers to God’s shaping each individual, in either the womb of the mother or the loins of Adam (Th). Others considered these statements to refer directly to God’s creation and formation of Adam and only indirectly or representatively to the creation of the rest of mankind (R, Th). For God’s having created the first human being from clay with His two Hands, see 38:71–75.

God’s command to the angels to bow to Adam is a key element in all accounts of Adam’s creation (2:34; 15:29; 17:61; 18:50; 20:116; 38:73–74) and can be understood to indicate that primordial human beings, or human beings before the fall, hold a station higher than that of the angels. Because in the Islamic tradition one should not bow to any being but God, commentators sometimes explain the command to prostrate before Adam as being merely symbolic in nature, or they say that the angels were ultimately bowing to God and taking Adam as their qiblah, or direction of prayer (R). It is also possible to prostrate in recognition of the spiritual greatness of another rather than as a form of worship; see 12:100, where Joseph’s entire family bows to him after being reunited with him. And they—that is, the angels—all prostrated save Iblīs. The phrasing of this statement, which suggests that Iblīs is among the angels, represents an important Quranic basis for the idea that Iblīs was himself an angel, although in 18:50, in an identical context, Iblīs is said to be of the jinn. This has given rise to a debate among Islamic scholars about whether Iblīs should be classified as an angel or a jinn; see 2:30c.

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12 He said, “What prevented thee from prostrating when I commanded thee?” He said, “I am better than him. Thou hast created me from fire, while Thou hast created him from clay.”

12 Iblīs explains his refusal to prostrate before Adam by asserting his superiority over Adam on the basis of the argument that he was created from fire, which he perceives as a more powerful and nobler substance than clay, from which Adam was created. This argument also appears explicitly in 38:76 and is implicit in Iblīs’s dismissive remarks about Adam being made of clay in 15:33. Iblīs’s claim to have been created from fire lends some support to the view that Iblīs was a jinn, since God created jinn from smokeless fire (55:15). Iblīs’s argument,
however, is self-serving and partial, in both senses of the term. Although fire may be luminous, subtle, and characterized by levity and lightness (Q, R, T), it is also associated with fickleness, recklessness, restlessness, and destructiveness—with grandeur, but also haughtiness, qualities consistent with the arrogance (see v. 13) that ultimately leads to Iblīs’s perdition (Q, T). By contrast, clay or earth is base, heavy, dark, and low lying (R), but also has the properties of gravity, forbearance, humility, and stability. It is these latter qualities in Adam that lead him to seek and receive God’s forgiveness after his disobedience (Q, T; see v. 23). Clay or earth can also serve as a place of prayer. Moreover, in the Islamic context it is the constituent elements of clay—namely, water and earth—that serve as a means of ritual purification (see 4:43; 5:6), not fire (unlike in Zoroastrianism, for example); and it is fire rather than clay that is a means of Divine punishment in the Hereafter (Q).

Iblīs’s argument, based purely on the original substance from which Adam was created, makes Iblīs blind to other ways in which God had ennobled Adam, such as creating him with His two Hands (38:75), breathing into him His Spirit (15:29; 32:9; 38:72), and endowing him with exceptional knowledge (2:31). Iblīs’s argument is based on analogy, an all too human form of reasoning, but he presents it in the face of the direct Divine command to prostrate before Adam. Analogical reasoning (qiyās) is one of the four major sources of law in Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence (although generally opposed or used only rarely in the Ḥanbalī school) and is used in the science of logic. Iblīs’s contention here, however, was likened by some to a form of qiyās, and it is sometimes cited as a reason to discount or reject qiyās as a source of law, notably in the Jaʿfarī Shiite school, with the argument that “the first to use analogical reasoning was Iblīs!” (Q, T). It may be argued, however, that the problem in the case of Iblīs stemmed not from his use of analogical reasoning as such, but rather from his having employed such reasoning in order to oppose or subvert a direct Divine command; those who accept analogical reasoning as a source of law always subordinate its authority to that of the Quran and Prophetic practice (sunnah; Q).

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13 He said, “Get down from it! It is not for thee to wax arrogant here. So go forth! Thou art surely among those who are humbled.”

13 The command to Iblīs, Get down from it—that is, leave the Garden—is also found in 2:36 and 20:123, and in v. 24 a similar command is addressed to Adam and his wife as well. Iblīs is then chastised for “waxing arrogant” (see also
38:75). *It is not for thee to wax arrogant here* also suggests that the Garden itself is a place in which no arrogance can be tolerated, as it is a place for humility and obedience; some have suggested that Iblīs’s arrogance, even more than or in addition to his disobedience, was the cause of his exile from the Garden. This verse thus serves as a warning to human beings, who in several verses are accused of “waxing arrogant,” since this may bar one from the paradisal Garden (Bḍ).

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14 He said, “Grant me respite till the Day they are resurrected.”

15 He said, “Truly thou art among those granted respite.”

14–15 Despite Iblīs’s banishment in v. 13, here he asks for, and is granted, respite from God, so that he will neither die nor be punished (Bḍ) *till the Day they are resurrected*, referring to the Day of universal Resurrection and Judgment (cf. 15:36–38; 17:62; 38:79–81).

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16 He said, “Because Thou hast caused me to err, I shall surely lie in wait for them on Thy straight path.

16 Iblīs claims that God has *caused* him *to err*, and some commentators have considered Iblīs’s claim to represent a true statement, albeit one that does not excuse his actions (R, Z), and it may be seen as consistent with Quranic verses that seem to indicate that God “misleads” certain people or allows them to go astray (see, e.g., 2:26; 40:74; 74:31). Others held that God caused Iblīs to err only insofar as His command to Iblīs to prostrate before Adam uncovered Iblīs’s hidden pride and stubbornness (R). Nonetheless, this account of Iblīs raised profound questions for certain Islamic theologians and mystics. Some even suggested that in commanding Iblīs to prostrate before Adam, God put Iblīs in a deliberately impossible position—commanding Iblīs to do something He already knew he would not do. Since Iblīs, like all creatures, was charged with worshipping and obeying only God, prostrating before Adam would simultaneously represent an act of obedience to God’s command and—according to the thinking some commentators and mystics imaginatively attributed to Iblīs—a compromise of his
obligation to worship only God, since prostrating before Adam would mean bowing to someone other than God (see Aj and R for brief references to this idea). The Baghdādī mystic al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922) famously imagined Iblīs as a sincere lover of God who could not bring himself to bow to anyone other than Him, even on pain of his own ultimate destruction and eternal banishment from his Beloved.

After blaming God for his fall into error, Iblīs then vowed, I shall surely lie in wait for them, that is, for Adam and his progeny. Having despaired of God’s Mercy and Forgiveness and thus of ever regaining his position of proximity to God, Iblīs (whose name may be related to ablāsa, meaning “to despair”) became intent on destroying the relationship between God and His newly privileged creature. It may be that Iblīs also blamed Adam or human beings as a whole for his fall into error and wished that he might be, in turn, the cause of their corruption, just as they, in his view, had been the cause of his (Z).

On Thy straight path means on the path of Islam, or true religion (R), indicating that Iblīs will seek to target those believing human beings seeking to live in obedience to God. The Quran mentions in several passages the various ways in which Iblīs, or Satan (Shayṭān, as he is called after his banishment), fulfills his vow to try to mislead human beings: “whispering” to them, as he does to Adam (7:20; 20:120); “commanding indecency” (2:268; 24:21); “deranging” them with his touch (2:275) or voice (17:64); “making them slip” (3:155); “sowing fear” (3:174); making them (false) promises (4:120; 14:22; 17:64); inciting evil between them (12:100; 17:53), sometimes through wine and gambling (5:90); making their evil deeds “seem fair unto them” (6:43; 8:48; 16:63; 27:24; 29:38); causing them to forget God and His commandments (6:68; 12:42; 18:63; 58:19); and even by attempting to alter revelation (22:52).

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Then I shall come upon them from in front of them and from behind them, and from their right and from their left. And Thou wilt not find most of them thankful.”

17 According to al-Rāzī, that Satan will come upon them from in front of them and from behind them may refer to his causing them to doubt the reality of Resurrection and Judgment and deluding them into thinking that this world is eternal; to his cutting off their desire for the Hereafter while increasing their desire for worldly things; or to his inciting them to disbelieve in the prophets of their time as well as those of the past. He will also come upon them . . . from their right and their left, meaning that he will corrupt them through inciting both disbelief and
religious innovation (bidʿah).

In explaining why Satan comes at people from these four directions, but not from above or below them, al-Rāzī says that when Satan made this vow to mislead human beings, the angels’ hearts softened toward them, and they asked God how human beings could possibly escape Satan’s surrounding influence. God replied that two paths remained free and open to mankind, that above them and that below them, so that if they raised their hands in supplication to God or bowed their heads to the ground in humility, they would be forgiven for their sins (R). The Quran elsewhere indicates that Iblīs’s prediction Thou wilt not find most of them thankful is indeed accurate, for 34:20 states, And Iblīs did indeed prove his opinion of them to be true; and they followed him, save for a group among the believers. See also 10:60; 27:73; 34:13.

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18 He said, “Go forth from it, disgraced and banished! Whosoever among them follows you, I shall surely fill Hell with you all.”

18 For similar presentations of the Divine reaction to Iblīs’s refusal to prostrate and his argument defending his refusal, see 15:34–35, 43; 17:63; 38:77–78, 85. Here, as in these verses, Iblīs is told Go forth from it—that is, from the Garden of Eden—indicating that he has been banished from the Garden, but not necessarily from the celestial realm altogether—hence Iblīs’s continued presence in Paradise, so that he is later able to tempt Adam and Eve while they are in the Garden (vv. 20–22). The command here, Go forth (ukhruj), is different from the command Get down (ahabitū), issued to Iblīs, Adam, and his wife collectively in v. 24, which marks more clearly their collective descent from the celestial realm. The Divine threat regarding those who follow Iblīs (Satan) that He shall surely fill Hell with you all suggests that Satan, along with the disbelieving and iniquitous human beings he misleads, will be punished in Hell together. From another perspective, however, Satan can be said to be already in Hell, which exists, in a sense, even now and not just in the future. Other verses, including 11:119; 32:13; 38:85 (this last similarly occurs in the context of a parallel account about Adam), also suggest that Satan, along with evil human beings and jinn, will be in Hell together.

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19 “O Adam! Dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden, and
eat from wheresoever you two will, but approach not this tree, lest you two be among the wrongdoers.”

19 Cf. 2:35 and commentary. Adam is here commanded to dwell . . . in the Garden along with his wife; that is, Eve, or Ḥawwā’ in Arabic, whose name does not appear in the Quran, although it is commonly used in the Islamic tradition. Until this point, the narrative has focused solely on Adam and Iblīs, but at this point Eve enters the account without any explicit mention of her own origin. Although it is clear in the Quran that Adam also represents all of humanity—male and female—in the account of his original creation, his vicegerency, his Divinely granted knowledge, and the prostration of the angels before him (cf. 2:30–34), the Quran does not explicitly discuss the process by which this primordial Adam is differentiated into the first male and female who “dwell in the Garden” after Iblīs’s expulsion from it. The Biblical story of Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib (Genesis 2:21–22), however, is referenced in the Ḥadīth, and many commentators have considered 4:1: O mankind! Reverence your Lord, Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate, and from the two has spread abroad a multitude of men and women, an oblique reference to the creation of Eve from Adam (see 4:1c). In this case, however, Eve can be said to have been created not from Adam as male, but rather from the original androgynic Adam who is the prototype of all humanity, both male and female. Adam and his wife may eat any of the fruits of the Garden that they wish, but they are warned together not to approach this tree, which commentators variously describe as a wheat or grain plant, a fig tree, or a grapevine (see 2:35c). This tree is described as the Tree of Everlastingness in 20:120. The description of the tree distinguishes the Quranic account from the Biblical one, where the tree is identified as the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:17).

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20 Then Satan whispered to them, that he might expose to them that which was hidden from them of their nakedness. And he said, “Your Lord has only forbidden you this tree, lest you should become angels, or among those who abide [forever].”

20 Iblīs whispered to them, meaning either that he spoke to them openly in a low voice or that he spoke subtly to their hearts (R) in order to tempt them toward
disobeying God (for Satan’s “whispering,” see 7:16c; 114:4c) and thereby to expose . . . their nakedness, which had been hidden from them. See also 20:118–19, where Adam and his wife are told that they will experience no nakedness, hunger, thirst, or heat in the Garden. Adam and Eve’s realization of their nakedness is also a key element of the corresponding Biblical narrative (see Genesis 3:7–11). Adam and Eve’s act of disobedience is also said to expose their nakedness in 20:121, but in the present context a more extensive discussion of human nakedness and the Divine gift of raiment and adornment to cover it follows in vv. 22, 26–27, 31–32. The nakedness of Adam and Eve is widely glossed as a reference to their private parts (JJ, T, Z); according to the early narrator and traditionist Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. early second/eighth century), Adam and Eve were initially cloaked in light, so that their private parts were concealed from them (T, Z). Nakedness translates saw’ah, which derives from a root meaning something that is bad or evil, indicating that exposing one’s nakedness, or private parts specifically, is corrupting for human beings (R), and many commentators see this verse as evidence that exposing one’s private parts (except in legally permitted contexts, such as marriage) is inherently sinful (R, Z).

Iblīs tempts Adam and his wife by suggesting falsely that God had forbidden them the fruit of the tree only because eating it would allow them to become angels and to abide [forever], that is, to be immortal; cf. 20:120: Then Satan whispered to him. He said, “O Adam! Shall I show thee the Tree of Everlastingness, and a kingdom that never decays?” Perhaps it is in reference to this kingdom that Iblīs promises them that a minority read lest you should become angels (malakayn) as “lest you should become sovereigns of the kingdom (malikayn)” (T). By suggesting the possibility of their becoming angels, or immortal, Satan raises in them false hopes and desires, a satanic tactic mentioned elsewhere; see 4:119–20.

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21 And he swore unto them, “Truly I am a sincere adviser unto you.”

22 Thus he lured them on through deception. And when they tasted of the tree, their nakedness was exposed to them, and they began to sew together the leaves of the Garden to cover themselves. And their Lord called out to them, “Did I not forbid you from that tree, and tell you that Satan is a manifest enemy unto you?”
Iblīs (Satan) misleads Adam and Eve, swearing to them—according to commentators, swearing by God (Ṭ, Th, Z)—that he is their sincere adviser, although in vv. 16–17 Iblīs expresses his evil intentions toward human beings, and in v. 22 indicates that God had already warned Adam and his wife that Satan was their manifest enemy (see also 2:168, 208; 6:142; 12:5; 17:53; 36:60; 43:62). Satan “lures” Adam and his wife through deception—that is, through delusion and false promises—and Satan promises . . . naught but delusion (17:64; see also 4:120). Delusion and “false promises” are Satan’s primary tactics—he is the Deluder in 31:33; 35:5; and 57:14—for he has been given no power to compel human beings, and no authority over those who are believing servants of God (see 15:42; 16:99; 17:65; 34:21).

And when they—that is, Adam and Eve—tasted of the tree, they suddenly became aware of their nakedness, because their act of disobedience had effectively removed the Divinely ordered cover or light (see 7:20c) that had been concealing it from them. Contrary to the Biblical account in Genesis 3, where Eve is both the immediate object of Satan’s temptation and the agent of temptation for Adam, in the Quranic account Adam and Eve are both directly tempted by Satan and succumb to his temptation together. Some commentators do mention reports that Eve had been tempted first (Ṭ, Th), likely on the basis of the Biblical account, but the Quranic account itself is clear that Eve is not the cause of Adam’s fall; rather, the two participate equally in the transgression, the fall, and its consequences. That Adam and Eve are capable of disobeying God in Paradise indicates that they had free will even before the fall.

Adam and Eve’s sudden awareness of their nakedness suggests their loss of innocence and evokes a profound sense of alienation, even from themselves; that is, from the honored station in which God had created them, worthy as they had been of the angels’ prostration. This awareness prompts them to sew together leaves of the Garden to cover themselves, which serves as a scriptural basis for the Divine gift of raiment for human beings, as discussed in vv. 26–27, 31–32. The leaves they use are said by most traditional sources to be fig leaves (Ṭ, Z), as in the Biblical account, and several commentators mention that Adam attempted to hide from God out of shame, just as he does in Genesis 3:10. When God confronts Adam and Eve with their disobedience and their failure to heed His warning about Satan’s enmity, it is said that He called out to them, an expression that indicates distance and alienation, in contrast to God’s more intimate and direct address to Adam in v. 19 (Qu).

They said, “Our Lord! We have wronged ourselves. If
Thou dost not forgive us and have Mercy upon us, we shall surely be among the losers.”

23 Adam and Eve immediately accept blame and seek forgiveness, saying, We have wronged ourselves (see also 2:37 and commentary). Their admission indicates an awareness that their disobedience has brought harm only to themselves, for human action does not harm God in the least (cf. 3:144, 176; 47:32). They have “wronged themselves” in that their disobedience has alienated them from their original nature and from God (see 7:21–22c), even before God Himself declares their banishment in v. 24, for God does not wrong human beings in the least, but rather human beings wrong themselves (10:44; see also, e.g., 3:117, 135; 4:97; 9:70; 37:113). The penitent attitude and words of Adam and his wife model the appropriate attitude one should have after one has sinned; see, for example, 4:64, If, when they had wronged themselves, they had but come to thee and sought forgiveness of God, and the Messenger had sought forgiveness for them, they would surely have found God Relenting, Merciful. Despite their free admission of their own guilt, some commentators report that Adam added in his own defense that Satan had “sworn unto them by God” that he was their sincere adviser (v. 21), and that he (Adam) could not imagine that anyone would swear by God to perpetrate a lie (IK, Ṭ, Th, Z). Adam and his wife’s response to Divine chastisement contrasts sharply with that of Iblīs, who, when questioned about his act of disobedience, offers an argument in favor of his behavior (v. 12) and, when it is rejected, asks only for temporary respite from Divine punishment—not forgiveness—that he might take revenge upon human beings. Satan’s attitude is thus one of pride but also, it would seem, despair of Divine Forgiveness, whereas Adam’s is one of humility and hope in Divine Mercy.

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24 He said, “Get down, each of you an enemy to the other! There will be for you on earth a dwelling place, and enjoyment for a while.”

25 He said, “Therein you shall live, and therein you shall die, and from there shall you be brought forth.”

24–25 God’s command Get down, each of you an enemy to the other! (cf. 2:36; 20:123) is widely considered to be addressed to Adam and Eve and their
future progeny as well as to Iblīs, or Satan (Ṭ). The command is taken to indicate their banishment from the celestial realm altogether and is thus different from God’s earlier command banishing Iblīs from the Garden specifically (Get down from it, v. 13). Some Sufi commentators emphasize the providential and even merciful aspect of the fall of Adam and Eve, noting that their act of disobedience led to their assumption of vicegerency on the earth and offered them the opportunity to draw near to God once again—a drawing near that is only possible after the experience of distance and exile (Aj). Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh, an eighth-/fourteenth-century Shādhilī Sufi master, said in his book al-Ḥikam (“Aphorisms”), “An act of disobedience that bequeaths humility and need is better than an act of obedience that bequeaths might and pride” (Aj; al-Ḥikam, no. 96). Similarly, the fall affords God the opportunity to manifest His Attribute of Forgiveness and offers Adam, and by extension all human beings, the possibility of manifesting humility and repentance and returning to God, through which they attain a degree of perfection that was not possible without the experience of the fall.

Dwelling place translates mustaqarr, meaning a settled or established place; for a fuller discussion of this term, see 6:98c. The idea that earthly life entails enjoyment for a while is repeated in various ways elsewhere in the Quran (see, e.g., 16:80; and 2:36, also in relation to Adam). The fleeting and limited enjoyment of this world, however, is frequently compared with the permanence and totality of one’s enjoyment or punishment in the Hereafter (3:14; 4:77; 9:38; 10:70; 13:26; 20:131; 28:60; 40:39; 42:36), a reminder of which is provided by the reference to earthly life, earthly death, and resurrection (being brought forth) in v. 25.

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26 O Children of Adam! We have indeed sent down upon you raiment to cover your nakedness, and rich adornment. But the raiment of reverence, that is better. This is among the signs of God, that haply they may remember.

26 That God sent down upon you raiment may mean that He provided human beings the means with which to make clothing to cover their nakedness (Ṭ), revealed to them after Adam’s act of disobedience, or that He decreed or prescribed the wearing of clothing for mankind (Z). Some commentators invoke the blessing of raiment mentioned here to castigate the pre-Islamic practice of circumambulating the Kaʾbah in the nude (Ṭ). Rich adornment translates rīsh, which literally denotes the plumage of birds and metaphorically connotes wealth, finery, beautiful furnishings, and luxurious goods (Īṣ). When used to refer to
clothing, it can mean ornamental clothing, especially outer garments that indicate wealth and status, as well as other ornamental items. The verse thus enjoins both clothing that covers one’s nakedness and clothing used purely for adornment, indicating that beauty and adornment are a worthy aim (R, Z).

The *raiment of reverence* (*libās al-taqwā*) is sometimes interpreted as referring to armor worn in battle, since the word for reverence (*taqwā*) is derived from a root related to “protection,” but it can also refer to the clothing one dons for prayer (R). Others suggest that the *raiment of reverence* refers back to the *raiment used to cover . . . nakedness*, indicating that the clothing that covers one’s nakedness is better than that worn purely for adornment (R, Ṭ). The *raiment of reverence* is most widely interpreted, however, as referring to a combination of pious qualities—including faith, modesty, righteous deeds, beautiful comportment, and fear of God (R, Ṭ, Z)—that together can be said to constitute reverence (*taqwā*) as the term is used in the Quran (see also 2:2c). For this reason, al-Rāzī maintains that the private parts (or “shame”) of believers are always covered, even when they are naked, while those of the profligate are always “uncovered,” even when they are clothed (R).

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27 O Children of Adam! Let not Satan tempt you, as he caused your parents to go forth from the Garden, stripping them of their raiment to show them their nakedness. Surely he sees you—he and his tribe—whence you see them not. We have indeed made the satans the friends of those who do not believe.

27 *Let not Satan tempt you*, addressed to the *Children of Adam* and thus to human beings as a whole, extends the warning that God issued to Adam about Satan, as implied in His question to Adam in v. 22, *Did I not . . . tell you that Satan is a manifest enemy unto you?* (see also 20:117). *Your parents* refers to Adam and his wife, whose *nakedness* was exposed to them after succumbing to Satan’s temptation. The warning continues, reminding human beings that *he*—that is, Satan—and *his tribe* of jinn and other “satans” see human beings, although human beings do not see them, for both Satan and the jinn are considered to have subtle rather than material bodies (R)—a distinction symbolized by the idea that Satan and the jinn are made of fire, while Adam and his progeny are made of clay (see v. 12).
That human beings do not see Satan and his tribe also indicates the latter’s subtle and deceptive tactics (Z), as they tempt human beings in ways that they neither anticipate nor immediately recognize, as when Satan swears by God to Adam and his wife that he is their sincere adviser (see v. 21; 7:23c). The idea that the disbelievers and wrongdoers have satans as their friends and protectors is found elsewhere in the Quran; see 2:14; 7:30. In 2:102, the satans “teach people sorcery,” and in 6:121 they inspire their friends to dispute with the believers. Although in the present verse satans seems to refer to the progeny and minions of Satan among the jinn, “satans” can also come from among human beings; see 6:112: Thus have We made for every prophet an enemy—satans from among mankind and jinn, who inspire each other with flowery discourse in order to deceive. See also 4:76, which refers to certain human beings—namely, the opponents of the believers—as the allies (or “friends”) of Satan (awliyāʾ al-Shayṭān), as opposed to the friends of God (awliyāʾ Allāh) in 10:62. For Ashʿarite theologians, such as al-Rāzī, and those with a more determinist understanding of Divine-human relations, that God is said to have made the satans the friends of the disbelievers indicates God’s active role in leading some human beings into error (R).

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28 When they commit an indecency, they say, “We found our fathers practicing it, and God has commanded us thus.” Say, “Truly God commands not indecency. Do you say of God that which you know not?”

28 Indecency (fāḥishah) sometimes refers specifically to sexual transgression (see 4:15c; 4:22c), but elsewhere (e.g., 6:151) it refers to all sin and transgression that is particularly abominable (T). In the context of the discussion about nakedness in relation to the story of Adam’s temptation, some have suggested that the particular indecency mentioned here is the pre-Islamic Arab custom of circumambulating the Kaʿbah in the nude (T, Z). When they—that is, the disbelievers who take satans for their friends (v. 27)—commit such indecencies, they seek to excuse themselves by arguing that they are merely following the custom of their fathers (an excuse disbelievers offer in several Quranic verses: 2:170; 5:104; 21:52–53; 31:21), although the excuse of blindly following others in religious belief and practice (taqlid) is never accepted, even if it is ancestors who are being followed. In vv. 172–73, the primordial covenant in which all human beings recognize the Lordship of God prior to their earthly existence is said to nullify all such excuses, for all human beings can be said to know, deep in their
soul, the truth about God, although some may have forgotten it. The disbelievers also sometimes argue that the “indecencies” they practice were “commanded” by or otherwise attributable to God (see 6:148 and commentary). But the response is that God commands not indecency; rather, it is Satan who enjoins indecency and wrong (24:21; see also 2:168–69, 268).

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Say, “My Lord has commanded justice. So set your faces [toward Him] at every place of prayer, and call upon Him, devoting religion entirely to Him. Just as He originated you, so shall you return.”

29 God has commanded justice (qist), not indecency, as the disbelievers allege in v. 28. Qist (justice) can also mean, more generally, what is right or proper, and it is connected by some with the testimony of faith, “There is no god but God,” following 3:18: God bears witness that there is no god but He, as do the angels and the possessors of knowledge, upholding justice (qist; R). So set your faces [toward Him]—that is, toward the qiblah, or direction of prayer, which is toward the Sacred Mosque in Makkah (2:144, 150)—at every place of prayer. This may mean to turn toward the qiblah in prayer “wheresoever you may be” (see 2:144); however, the verse could also mean to turn toward the qiblah at every time of prayer (R, Z). “Turning,” “setting,” or “submitting” one’s face toward God is a frequent Quranic image of monotheistic devotion, signifying the orientation of one’s whole being toward worship of and obedience to God (see 2:112; 3:20; 6:79; 10:105; 30:30, 43; 31:22).

To call upon Him most commonly means to supplicate God for one’s spiritual and material needs, although some commentators here consider it a reference to canonical prayer or worship generally (R, Z). As in several other verses, “calling upon God” is followed by the mention of devoting religion entirely to Him (see also 10:22; 29:65; 31:32; 39:2, 11, 14; 40:14, 65; 73:8), a phrase connoting sincere worship for the sake of God alone. Just as He originated you, so shall you return is one of several ways in which the Quran indicates the analogous nature of original creation and resurrection, suggesting that God’s ability to create, which was widely recognized even by some pre-Islamic Arabs, should allay any doubts about His ability to resurrect human beings (Ṭ). According to a ḥadīth, people will be resurrected in the same state as that in which they were born, “barefoot, naked, and uncircumcised” (Ṭ); that is, alone and in utter dependency upon God. See 6:94: And [God will say], “Now you have come unto Us alone, just as We created you the
Some He has rightly guided, and some are deserving of error. Truly they took satans as their protectors apart from God and deem them rightly guided.

The influence of God upon the moral destiny of human beings seems to be confirmed by the first line of this verse, some He has rightly guided, which, like several other verses, indicates that not all are guided, for had God willed, He would have gathered them all to guidance (6:35). Others are deserving of error; meaning, according to some, that their actions have made them deserving of the description that they are in error (Z). Mu'tazilite theologians, who believed that human moral destiny was determined by human choice and action, have understood references to God guiding or misleading some but not others as modes of reward and punishment—that is, God guides some as a reward for virtuous acts and misleads others as a form of punishment for evil deeds. In the present context, those who took satans as their protectors apart from God are deserving of error for having done so (R). Many Ash'arite theologians, by contrast, have taken the present verse, and others like it, as scriptural evidence for Divine control over human moral destiny (R). Regarding taking satans as friends or protectors, see 7:27c.

O Children of Adam! Put on your adornment at every place of worship, and eat and drink, but be not prodigal. Truly He loves not the prodigal.

Adornment translates zīnah—a term that has both positive and negative connotations in the Quran, insofar as it refers to worldly sources of beauty or status (cf. 11:15; 16:8; 18:28, 46) that are part of God’s provision for human beings, but are also potential sources of pride, temptation, or worldliness that lead to forgetfulness of God and the Hereafter. It may also refer to clothing or any other item used to beautify oneself (Z), but in the present context, following shortly after the account of Satan stripping Adam and Eve of their raiment to show them their nakedness (v. 27), it most likely refers to clothing used to cover one’s nakedness rather than ornamentation (R). The Children of Adam are instructed to put on their adornment; as well as 18:48; 21:104.
adornment at every place of worship, but elsewhere women are instructed to conceal their adornment (usually understood to mean parts of their bodies); see 24:31c; 33:33c.

Some commentators see all three injunctions in the present verse, including the encouragement to eat and drink, as relating to the practices of the Arabs prior to the coming of Islam, who, as noted earlier, circumambulated the Ka‘bah naked, placed arbitrary restrictions on the consumption of certain foods (see 5:103c; 6:136–39, 143–44), and limited their overall consumption of food during their pilgrimage to the Ka‘bah (R). Some reports indicate that the Quraysh had established a rule that the only clothing that could be worn and the only food that could be eaten in the sacred precincts of Makkah were the clothing and food of the Quraysh, since they were the “people of the Sacred Mosque.” Any who wished to enter the sacred precincts of Makkah and perform the pilgrimage thus had to borrow or buy clothing from the Quraysh and eat their food or go naked and abstain from eating (Q). The present verse is thus understood as putting an end to such practices by instructing people to put on their adornment at every place of worship, and so to perform the rites at the Ka‘bah clothed, and to eat and drink, that is, of all the good and lawful things that God has provided for them (Ṭ, Z). It should be noted, however, that nowhere in Islamic holy places are men clad as thinly as during the ḥajj, as the male ḥāram, or pilgrim dress, consists of only two unseen pieces of cloth. This brings them as close as possible to their original nakedness without actually being naked.

The Command to put on . . . adornment for prayer is also related to the injunction, established by Prophetic practice (sunnah), that people should groom themselves when attending prayer, including putting on perfume and their best apparel, but avoid excess or pride in doing so (Z). Indeed, the verse indicates that one should not be prodigal, which can mean to exceed the bounds of what is lawful to consume (R, Ṭ) or to be excessive and wasteful in one’s consumption (R; see also 10:12c). With regard to the latter meaning, some mention the spiritual and physical benefits that come from eating little or only enough to fulfill one’s basic needs (Q). Still others interpret the adornment encouraged here to be spiritual rather than material in nature; al-Qushayrī, for example, identifies the adornment of the souls of the worshippers with the marks of prostration (on their foreheads), and the adornment of the hearts of the gnostics with the “lights of being [wujūd].” That God loves not the prodigal is also found in 6:141.

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.say, “Who has forbidden the adornment of God, which He has brought forth for His servants, and the good things
among [His] provision?” Say, “These are for those who believe, in the life of this world, and on the Day of Resurrection they are for them alone.” Thus do We expound the signs for a people who know.

32 This verse reaffirms the lawfulness of adornment, which God has provided for human beings (v. 26), and chastises all those, like the idolatrous Makkans, who would forbid such adornment arbitrarily. Adornment, here as elsewhere, may be related to clothing, but may also be related to any type of ornamentation. Some connect this verse with a hadīth in which the Prophet instructs one of his followers to avoid excesses in asceticism and to reject the ascetic impulse to abstain from, among other things, owning property, eating meat, having children, or wearing perfume (R). All of these might fall under the category of “worldly adornment,” but this verse and various ahādīth indicate that such things are lawful so long as temperance and propriety are maintained. Such adornment is for the believers in the life of this world—that is, to be enjoyed here—and on the Day of Resurrection it is for them alone. This indicates that though both believers and disbelievers may enjoy various kinds of adornment in their earthly lives, in the Hereafter such adornment is for the believers exclusively (R, Z).

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33 Say, “My Lord has only forbidden indecencies—both outward and inward—and sin, and tyranny without right, and that you should ascribe partners unto God, for which He has sent down no authority, and that you should say of God that which you know not.”

33 Contrary to the arbitrary prohibitions of the idolaters alluded to in vv. 31–32, God forbids only indecencies . . . and sin (indecencies here refers to particularly abominable sins). He forbids outward and inward sins, meaning either public and private sins, respectively, or an outward sinful action and its inward intention; see 6:120c; 6:151–52c. In the phrase tyranny without right, tyranny translates baghy, which connotes oppression and overweening arrogance (Z) as well as rebelliousness (see also 10:23; 42:27, 42). God also forbids the ascribing of partners unto Him, or shirk, which is identified in 4:48 and 4:116 as the only sin that will not be forgiven if one dies without repenting. For such “partners” God
has sent down no authority, that is, no revealed warrant or instruction to worship them. Finally, it is forbidden to say of God that which you know not, that is, to falsely ascribe ideas, practices, or words to Him, something similarly criticized in 2:80, 169, and 7:28 as well as in the many verses that chastise those who would “fabricate (lies) against God” (see, e.g., 3:94; 4:50; 6:21; 7:37; 10:17).

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34 And for every community there is a term appointed. When their term comes, they shall not delay it by a single hour, nor shall they advance it.

34 The idea that every community or people has a term appointed—that is, a fixed term that can be neither “advanced” nor “delayed” and after which they will cease to exist on earth—is referenced in several verses; see 10:49; 15:5; 23:43; 34:30; 71:4. Individual human beings and humanity as a whole are also said to have a “fixed” or “appointed” term as far as life in this world is concerned (16:61; 34:30; 71:4).

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35 O Children of Adam! Should there come unto you messengers from among yourselves, recounting My signs unto you, then whosoever is reverent and makes amends, no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve.

35 This verse is similar to 2:38, which also concludes an account of Adam’s fall: We said, “Get down from it, all of you. If guidance should come to you from Me, then whosoever follows My Guidance, no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve.” In both cases, the punishment of exile from the Garden is followed by the consolation that God will send human beings guidance, here in the form of messengers from among yourselves. And by virtue of responding to the messengers with reverence and “making amends”—that is, repenting of one’s former actions and obeying the commands and prohibitions brought by the messengers (Ṭ)—hope is offered that Adam and his progeny may find their way back to a place—that is, the celestial Garden—in which no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve. This last clause is repeated in several verses as a reference to success and bliss in the Hereafter; see 2:62, 112, 262, 274, 277;
But those who deny Our signs and treat them with disdain, it is they who are the inhabitants of the Fire. They shall abide therein.

That those who deny the signs of God in this life will face punishment in Hellfire in the next is found in several verses; cf. 2:39; 4:56; 5:10, 86; 22:51, 57; 57:19; 64:10. Denying the signs of God may refer here particularly to rejecting the message of God’s Oneness brought by the messengers, to disavowing the other truths and Divine commands they brought, and to being too proud to affirm the truth of the proofs and guidance offered by revelation (Ṭ).

And who does greater wrong than one who fabricates a lie against God or denies His signs? For such as these, their portion of the book will reach them, till, when Our messengers come to take them away, they will say, “Where is that which you used to call upon apart from God?” They will respond, “They have forsaken us.” And they bear witness against themselves that they were disbelievers.

Who does greater wrong than one who fabricates a lie against God is a rhetorical question found in several verses (6:21, 93, 144; 10:17; 11:18; 18:15; 29:68; 61:7), and, as here, the same is said of those who reject or deny God’s signs (cf. 6:157; 18:57; 32:22). That their portion of the book will reach them means that they will receive their portion of worldly provision and longevity (Q, Sy, Ṭ, Z), of good or ill (Ṭ), of punishment (R, Ṭ, Ṭs), or of salvation or damnation in the Hereafter (Ṭ), which has been ordained for them in the book, which here refers to the Book of all things that will come to pass or to the Preserved Tablet (see 85:22c), rather than to revealed scripture (Ṭ). The messengers who will take them away are the angels who collect the souls of human beings at death (see 6:61–62c; 32:11). The idea that false idols and authorities as well as Satan, and indeed anything that one calls upon apart from God, will forsake one in the Hereafter is
found in several verses (6:24, 94; 7:53; 10:30; 11:21; 16:87; 25:29; 28:75; 40:73–74), as is the idea that disbelievers and wrongdoers will ultimately bear witness against themselves on the Day of Judgment; see 6:130; 24:24; 36:65; and 41:20–22, where it is parts of one’s body that will testify independent of oneself to the sins one has committed.

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38 He will say, “Enter the Fire among communities of jinn and men that have passed away before you!” Every time a community enters, it curses its sister, till, when they have all successively arrived there, the last of them will say of the first of them, “Our Lord, it was they who led us astray; so give them a double punishment in the Fire.” He will say, “For each of you it shall be doubled, but you know not.”

39 And the first of them will say to the last of them, “You are no better than us; so taste the punishment for that which you have earned.”

38–39 He—that is, God, or according to some, the guardian of Hell (R)—will command those who “fabricated lies against God” and denied His signs to enter the Fire of Hell. The communities . . . that have passed away before you refers to sects or communities following false religious ideas (Ṭ). That each community curses its sister means either that each community will curse previous communities or that the later generations of a false religious community or sect will curse the earlier generations of the same community or sect (R, Ṭ). This curse and mutual disowning of the leaders and followers among those who disbelieved reflects the rancor among the denizens of Hell, which contributes to their torment (see, e.g., 2:166–67; 29:25; 34:31–33). Thus not only will the false idols and authorities forsake those who worshipped them (v. 37), but the disbelievers and wrongdoers will forsake one another, and thus the Last Day is also referred to as the Day of Mutual Dispossession in 64:9. The rancor among those in Hell contrasts sharply with the relations between the people of Paradise, whose conversation is marked by mutual greetings and exhortations of “Peace” (see 10:10; 14:23; 19:62; 56:25–26), as God has removed all “rancor” from them (see v. 43 as well as 15:47). See also 43:67: Friends on that Day will be enemies to one another, save
for the reverent.

That the last of them will blame the first of them for their having gone astray may mean that later generations of a condemned religious community will blame earlier generations (R, T), that the rank-and-file members of a condemned community will blame their leaders (R, Z), or both (Ts), as in 33:67: They will say, “Our Lord! Truly we obeyed our leaders and elders, and they caused us to stray from the way.” It may, however, mean that later communities as a whole will blame earlier communities (Ts). The sixth Shiite Imam, Ja’far al-Ṣādiq, glosses the first of them, who are blamed for leading others astray, as unjust leaders (Ts). The blaming of one’s elders and earlier generations of one’s community for religious error reflects a similar impulse among disbelievers in this world to reject prophetic warnings with the excuse that they are following their fathers’ religious practices (see 7:28c; 2:170; 5:104; 21:52–54). The Quran indicates that excuses are always rejected both in this world and in the Hereafter, and vv. 172–73 make it clear that one cannot excuse one’s actions by reference to following one’s ancestors.

Those who were led astray by others will ask that those whom they followed be given a double punishment, that is, one for their leaders’ own disbelief and one for their deceiving others by inciting them to error and preventing them from following the path of God (T, Ts). See also 33:66–68, where those who followed others in religious error make the same request. The followers may be trying to make good on a claim that the leaders of disbelief make in 29:12: Those who disbelieve say to those who believe, “Follow our path and we shall bear your sins.” However, in the following lines, this promise is shown to be, in a way, both true and false: But they bear not aught of their sins. Truly they are liars. Surely they will bear their own burdens, and others’ burdens along with their own (29:12–13); see also 14:21; 40:47. This suggests that though the leaders of error do bear an additional burden for their having led others astray (see also 16:25), this does not actually alleviate the burden of those who followed them, for none shall bear the burden of another (6:164; 17:15; 35:18; 39:7; 53:38). Thus the response to the followers’ request in the present verse that their leaders’ punishment be doubled is, For each of you it shall be doubled, indicating that their request is granted, in a sense, but that the doubling of their leaders’ punishment in no way diminishes their own punishment by comparison.

According to al-Rāzī, the leaders do bear additional guilt for having led others astray, but the punishment is nonetheless doubled for both because this is the nature of Hell itself—namely, that its punishments continually follow one upon the other indefinitely (R); see 4:56: We shall surely cause them to burn in a Fire. As often as their skins are consumed, We shall replace them with other skins, that they may taste the punishment.
Truly those who deny Our signs and wax arrogant against them, the gates of Heaven shall not be opened for them, nor shall they enter the Garden till the camel pass through the eye of the needle. Thus do We recompense the guilty!

40 The punishment of those who deny God’s signs and the messages of His prophets and wax arrogant against them is mentioned in several verses (6:93; 7:133–36; 23:45–48; 39:59–60; 41:15–16). For such people, the gates of Heaven shall not be opened for them in the Hereafter, or even in this life, according to some commentators, insofar as the words and actions of such people, being evil, will not “ascend to” or “be lifted up to” God; see 35:10: Unto Him ascends the good word, and He uplifts the righteous deed (R, T, Z). The image of the camel passing through the eye of the needle is a metaphor for something so difficult as to be impossible and is similarly used in the Gospel to describe the difficulty of a rich man entering the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:24; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25). Camel here translates jamal, and many commentators consider the term to be a clear reference to this large animal. Some, however, note that the term could be read as juml, meaning a thick cable woven of many strands, such as is used to secure ships (R, T, Z); al-Zamakhsharī, for example, favors this reading, since the idea of a large cable passing through the eye of a needle seems a more natural metaphor than one referring to a camel. Some Biblical commentaries, such as the Geneva Study Bible, similarly suggest that the term “camel” in the Gospel account may refer to a thick cable, although most indicate that the image of a camel (or in some cases, an elephant) passing through the eye of the needle was a well-known metaphor at that time.

Hell shall be their resting place, with coverings above them. And thus do We recompense the wrongdoers!

41 Resting place translates mihād, which is derived from a root meaning to “spread out” and thus connotes level ground, carpet, or other furnishing spread out beneath a person. Just as Hell shall be a resting place spread out beneath them, so too will there be coverings above them, and, according to 39:16, both will be of
Above them they shall have canopies of fire and below them canopies; with that does God strike fear into His servants. See also 29:55: On the Day when the punishment will cover them from above and from beneath their feet, and We shall say, “Taste that which you used to do!”

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As for those who believe and perform righteous deeds—We task no soul beyond its capacity—it is they who are the inhabitants of the Garden; they shall abide therein.

The idea that God tasks no soul beyond its given capacity is an important Quranic assertion found in several verses (2:233, 286; 6:152; 23:62; 65:7). It indicates that nothing is asked of a soul that cannot be accomplished, and without overwhelming hardship (Ṭ). Consequently, even the fundamental religious duties of Islam are made easier and less onerous for those in difficult situations; for example, those traveling may shorten their prayers and may postpone a mandatory fast for a later date; while those seriously and chronically ill may leave off fasting altogether, substituting charitable donations for their fast. This is because God desires ease for you, and He does not desire hardship for you (2:185). For al-Zamakhsharī the present verse indicates that the human capacity for faith, good works, and righteousness is vast, not narrow or constrained.

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And We shall remove whatever rancor lies within their breasts. Rivers shall run below them. And they will say, “Praise be to God, Who guided us unto this. We would not have been rightly guided, had God not guided us. The messengers of our Lord certainly brought the truth.” And a call will be made unto them, “This is the Garden. You have inherited it for that which you used to do.”

The idea that the inhabitants of Paradise are free of rancor and have had it “removed” by God (cf. 15:47) poses a sharp contrast to the mutual recriminations
between the inhabitants of Hell (see v. 38–39 and commentary). Some read the beginning of the verse to mean “We shall remove whatever rancor is in their breasts, while rivers run below them” (Ṭs). According to an early report, as the people of Paradise make their way toward the Garden, they will come upon a tree, at the base of which they will find two springs. They will cleanse themselves with one, which will refresh them and restore them to health, and drink from the other and thus be purified of all rancor (Ṭ). That rivers shall run below them reflects one of the primary Quranic descriptions of the paradisal Garden as having rivers running below, an image invoked in dozens of verses (see 2:25c).

Although this verse, like many others, indicates that paradisal states are earned as a recompense for that which you used to do—that is, as a reward for one’s deeds in this life (Z)—the attitude of the people of Paradise here is marked not by self-satisfaction, but by pure gratitude toward God for their having been guided toward correct belief and righteous actions in this life and having been guided over the bridge that is said to stretch across Hell and into Paradise in the Hereafter (Ṭs). The Quran frequently presents guidance as the prerogative solely of God: Truly the Guidance of God is guidance (2:120; 3:73; 6:71), and God leads astray whomsoever He will and guides whomsoever He will (14:4; 16:93). Moreover, whomsoever God guides, he is rightly guided (v. 178) and whomsoever God leads astray, no guide has he (v. 186); see also 17:97; 18:17; 32:24; 39:36–37; 74:31. Guidance is thus understood as a Divine blessing for which one must be grateful, in both this life (see, e.g., 2:185; 22:37) and the next.

The people of Paradise also recognize that the messengers . . . brought the truth (see also v. 53) and that the sending of messengers represents a Divine gift, by which God makes the means of guidance available to all human beings (Z), even if not all are guided. The call that is made to the people of Paradise announcing that they have inherited the Garden may be made by God or by one of the angels, although commentators usually favor the former (R, Ṭs). Those who are righteous are also said to inherit Paradise in 23:10–11 and 39:74. Some commentators indicate that the “inheritance” shown to the believers in this instance are the houses in Paradise, which they “inherit” from the disbelievers—that is, these were houses that would have belonged to the disbelievers in Paradise had they not “forfeited” them through their disbelief and evil deeds (R, Ṭ, Ṭs).

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your Lord promised to be true?” They will respond, “Yes.” Thereupon a herald shall proclaim in their midst, “The curse of God be upon the wrongdoers!”

44 There are several places in the Quran where, as here, the disbelievers acknowledge the truth of the promises and warnings brought by the prophets, but only belatedly, when it can bring no benefit to them or avert their punishment. In some cases, their acknowledgment of error comes when faced with judgment immediately upon or after death (6:30, 130), while in others their acknowledgment comes only when they are in or about to enter Hell (39:71; 40:49–50; 46:34; 67:8–10). In the present verse, it is the inhabitants of Paradise who question those in Hell, saying that they, the people of Paradise, have found what the Lord promised them by way of reward to be true, and asking the people of Hell if they have not found the same regarding their punishment in Hell (cf. 37:55–60; 57:13–14, for other conversations between those in Paradise and those in Hell). After the victory at Badr, the Prophet is reported to have addressed the dead among their Makkan enemies in similar terms, saying, “Have you found the promise of your Lord to be true? Surely I have found what my Lord promised me to be true” (IK). The Quran repeatedly states that God’s Promise is true (4:122; 10:4, 55; 18:21, 98; 30:60; 31:33; 35:5; 40:55, 77; 45:32; 46:17), and in 46:16 the Garden is also identified as the true promise that they—that is, the righteous believers—were promised.

The herald . . . in their midst refers to an angel—perhaps the angel who is the keeper of Hell—who communicates the curse of God upon the disbelievers in a manner audible both to them and to those in Paradise (R, Ṭs). Some Shiite traditions, however, identify the herald as ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, the close Companion, cousin, and son-in-law of the Prophet as well as the fourth “rightly guided caliph” and the first Shiite Imam (Ṭs). God’s curse upon them may be a reference to His Wrath and the punishment meted out to them (Ṭs) as well as to their exile and banishment from His Presence.

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45 Those who turn from the way of God and seek to make it crooked, disbelieving in the Hereafter.

45 See 11:19 for a nearly identical verse. The disbelievers are described here as those who turn from the way of God, which can mean both that they themselves turn away from the path of God as established by the laws and teachings
brought by the prophets and that they seek to turn others away from it. This is done
sometimes by force (R) and sometimes by other means, such as seeking to make it
crooked (see also 3:99; 7:86; 11:19; 14:3), that is, by distorting or altering it (T) or
obscuring it or mixing it with their own whims and desires (Ts), so that it is no
longer the “straight path”—a phrase the Quran uses in many verses to denote the
true religious path that leads to salvation (see, e.g., 1:6 and commentary)—as
established by God.

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46 And there will be a veil between them. And upon the
Heights are men who know all by their marks. They will
call out to the inhabitants of the Garden, “Peace be upon
you!” They will not have entered it, though they hope.

47 And when their eyes turn toward the inhabitants of the
Fire, they will say, “Our Lord! Place us not among the
wrongdoing people!”

46–47 The veil set between them—that is, between the people of Paradise
and the people of Hell—is likened by many commentators to the wall set down
between them in 57:13: On the Day when men who are hypocrites and women
who are hypocrites will say to those who believe, “Wait for us that we may
borrow from your light,” it will be said, “Turn back and seek a light!”
Thereupon a wall with a gate will be set down between them, the inner side of
which contains mercy, and on the outer side of which lies punishment (IK, R, Th,
Ts, Z). Elsewhere the Heights are described symbolically as a high sand dune
(Qm). The Heights, after which this sūrah is named, would thus refer to a place
atop this barrier or dune between Paradise and Hell, so that those perched atop it
can see both Paradise and Hell (Z), or according to some to the bridge (širāt) that
stretches over Hell and leads to Paradise (R, Ts). The Heights translates a`rāf, and
some say that this place is so named because, as the verse attests, those who occupy
it know (ya`rifūn, from the same root) all by their marks (IK, Th).

According to one set of interpretations, those upon the Heights occupy a
middle position between Paradise and Hell and represent Muslims who had been
negligent or slacking in their good works (Z) or whose good and bad works are
nearly equal (IK, R, Ts). A ḥadīth indicates that they are those who were killed
fighting in the way of God, but who had joined the fight without the permission of
their fathers (IK, Th). Such people would enter Paradise only belatedly and may thus be identified with those who await the Command of God (9:106; Z)—that is, they remain in a state in which their fate is still unknown to them for a while. They have not yet entered it—that is, the Garden—but they hope to do so, for they have trust in God’s Forgiveness and Mercy and are perhaps awaiting the intercession of the Prophet or, for Shiites, also the Imams (Ţs). They call out to the inhabitants of the Garden with the greeting Peace be upon you, the greeting associated in several verses with the paradisal state (see 10:10; 14:23; 19:62; 56:25–26) and the proper greeting between all believers (see 6:54 and commentary). When they see those in Hell, they appeal to God’s Mercy (Z), asking Him to spare them—that is, themselves—the fate of being placed among the wrongdoing people. Some have likened the a‘rāf to a kind of purgatory—a temporary middle ground or barzakh for those who are not placed immediately in either Paradise or Hell—and from which its occupants move only upward toward Paradise.

Indeed, most commentators indicate that those on the Heights will eventually enter Paradise, but many note that they will be the last to do so (R, Th) or that they are referred to as the “poor” in Paradise (IK, Th). Some have also identified then with those who did not attain to moral responsibility, either because of their youth at the time of their death or as a result of mental deficiency or illness (Ţb). Al-Ghazzâlî identified the people on the Heights as those whom the call to true religion had not reached. They thus occupy this place between Paradise and Hell, where they experience peace, but have neither the joy of being brought near to God nor the torment of being distant from Him (Aj). Insofar as the Heights were considered to represent an intermediate state in the Hereafter, there was much additional speculation about those who would occupy this state; suggestions included but were not limited to the offspring of idolaters, the believers among the jinn, and those who did good deeds only for the sake of earthly reward (IK).

Although a literal reading of the verse seems to support the idea that the people upon the Heights are believers whose moral record is deficient in some way and who are thus suspended for a time between Paradise and Hell, another quite different, but equally important, set of interpretations considers the Heights to be a reference to an exalted spiritual station. Those who hold this view have identified the people upon the Heights with various groups possessing exceptional spiritual qualities or status, such as those who are righteous and possess religious knowledge and understanding (Th). According to the Twelver Shiite interpretation of this verse, those upon the Heights are the Imams from among the family of the Prophet (Qm, Ţs). According to this reading, those whom the Imams acknowledge are admitted to Paradise, while those whom they deny enter Hellfire (Ţs). Another tradition attributed to Ibn ʿAbbâs states that those upon the Heights are the prominent Companions among the Prophet’s clan, the Banû Hâshim, including the Prophet’s uncles Ḥamzah and ʿAbbâs and his nephews and prominent young
Companions ʿAlī and Jaʿfar ibn Abī Ṭālib (Th, Ṭs).

Some Sufi commentators identify those upon the Heights as the people of gnosis, or spiritual knowledge (Kā, ST), who have transcended both Paradise and Hell, because they have left the trappings of the soul and its pleasures behind and are occupied only with the contemplation of God Himself (K). According to the latter interpretation, those have not yet entered Paradise, but hope to do so is a reference to the people of Paradise, not to the people of the Heights. Considering the Heights to be both an intermediate state and an exalted state, the Sufi commentator Ibn ʿAjībah identifies the Heights as a reference to the intermediate region (barzakh) between the exoteric Divine Law (sharīʿah) and ultimate spiritual Truth (ḥaqīqah); the people of the Heights are thus those whose status is between that of the spiritual elite and ordinary believers. They are those who are journeying in hope of reaching the Garden of Gnosis (i.e., the Garden of true knowledge of God; see 6:127c), while asking God not to put them in the “Fire of the veil” (i.e., the Fire of ignorance and separation from God). Still other reports have suggested that those upon the Heights are angels in the form of human beings (R, Th, Ṭs).

The marks, by which those on the Heights know all—that is, the people of Paradise and of Hell—are sometimes understood as referring to the “whiteness” or “blackness/darkness” of their faces (Aj, Th; see 3:106–7; 10:26–27; 39:60; 75:22; 80:38–41).

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And the inhabitants of the Heights will call out to men whom they know by their marks, “Your accumulating has not availed you, nor has your waxing arrogant.

Here, the men whom they know by their marks refers specifically to those in Hell, to whom the words of the inhabitants of the Heights are addressed. Your accumulating may refer both to their acquisition of wealth and to their increasing number (R, T, Ṭs). Although they may have amassed great wealth in their earthly life and outnumbered the believers, their greater wealth and numbers offer them no protection in the Hereafter; rather, for those who disobey God, their wealth and children increase them in naught but loss (71:21). See also 17:6, where though the Israelites were aided by God with wealth and children and made greater in number, it could not protect them from future punishment, and 34:35–37, where wealth and children can neither thwart punishment nor bring one closer to God. The idea that disbelievers and wrongdoers are great in number or perhaps even represent the majority of human beings is suggested in various verses (cf., e.g.,
Waxing arrogant is an attitude commonly attributed to disbelievers (e.g., 6:93; 7:133, 146; 10:75).

Are these the ones concerning whom you swore that God would not extend any mercy?” “Enter the Garden! No fear shall come upon you, nor shall you grieve.”

Those in Hellfire are asked rhetorically and ironically, Are these—that is, those who had seemed lowly in earthly life, but who now enjoy great status and bliss in Paradise (R)—the ones concerning whom you swore that God would not extend any mercy? The question may be posed by the people of the Heights, as a continuation of the statement in v. 48, but may also be spoken by God (IK, Ṭ) or by the angels (Ṭ); it refers to the disbelievers’ tendency to dismiss the idea that God could show favor to those who were of low social status in the life of this world (see, e.g., 6:53 and commentary). For the description of the paradisal state as one in which no fear shall come upon you, nor shall you grieve, see 7:35c.

The inhabitants of the Fire will call out to the inhabitants of the Garden, “Pour some water down upon us, or some of that which God has provided you.” They will respond, “Truly God has forbidden them both to the disbelievers.”

The request of the inhabitants of Hell that those in Paradise pour some water down upon them suggests that Paradise is situated symbolically above Hell (R, Z) and indicates the terrible heat and thirst generated by the Fire (R, Ṭs). The inhabitants of Hell also request from those in Paradise some of that which God has provided you, meaning the other drinks of Paradise (Z), such as honey, milk, or wine, or else the food and fruits that God has provided for them in the Garden (Ṭ, Ṭs, Z). This indicates that hunger is also one of the torments of Hell (R). According to al-Zamakhsharī, they ask for relief in this way, even if they despair of it ever being granted to them, because of the confusion and desperation generated by their
circumstances. The water that they ask for can be interpreted as a symbol for mercy, while that which God has provided may be a reference to the nearness and intimacy with God that those in Paradise have been granted (Su). Both are denied to those in Hell.

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who took their religion to be diversion and play, and were deluded by the life of this world. So this Day We forget them, as they forgot the meeting with this Day of theirs, and as they used to reject Our signs.

The disbelievers in Hell are described as those who took their religion to be diversion and play, an attitude attributed to them elsewhere (see 5:57c; 6:70; 21:2–3; 43:83; 52:11–12; 70:42), and as having been deluded by the life of this world (cf. 6:70, 130; 31:33; 35:5), for it is this world that is merely play and diversion (6:32; 29:64; 47:36; 57:20; see also 29:64c). The human proclivity toward forgetfulness of God and of moral obligations is an underlying theme in the Quran (see, e.g., 5:13–14; 6:44; 20:115), as is the corresponding and repeated encouragement to remember God and His commandments or to be reminded.

Having forgotten the meeting with this Day of theirs—that is, the Day of Judgment—the disbelievers are themselves forgotten by God; see also 9:67; 20:126; as well as 32:14, where they are forgotten as a punishment for having forgotten God; and 45:34, where their being forgotten is a requital for having forgotten His signs. The reciprocity of “forgetting” and “being forgotten” contributes to the larger theme of moral reflexivity in the Quran—for example, the deceivers are themselves deceived (2:9), and those who spend charitably spend ultimately for themselves (2:272)—and also reflects the Quranic dictum The recompense of an evil is an evil like unto it (42:40). To have forgotten the meeting with this Day of theirs means to have neglected to prepare for it by acting righteously in this world (R). That God forgets them is said to mean here that He does not respond to their plea for relief or does not show them mercy in this way (R), and that He neglects them and abandons them in their punishment (IK, R). Some commentators argue that God’s “forgetting” them does not mean that such people become absent from God’s Knowledge, for God does not “forget” in this sense; as it says in 20:52, He errs not, nor does He forget (IK). Indeed, from a metaphysical point of view, if God were to forget anything, that thing would cease to exist. Rather, the verse is understood to mean that God acts toward such people as if He had forgotten them; see 9:67c.
We have indeed brought them a Book, which We have expounded with knowledge, as a guidance and a mercy for a people who believe.

52 The Book here refers to the Divine Revelation that has been sent to all people (see, e.g., 16:36) or, according to al-Rāzī, to the Quran specifically. That it is expounded, in this case with knowledge, indicates that the religious truths it contains are laid out clearly and that, in it, truth is clearly distinguished from falsehood (Ṭ); cf. 6:55c, 97–98, 114, 126. It is a source of guidance and a mercy, but specifically for those who believe; see 2:2, where the Book is a guidance for the reverent, and 2:26, where it is said regarding the parables God sets forth in it, He misleads many by it, and He guides many by it, and He misleads none but the iniquitous.

Do they wait for aught save the full disclosure thereof? The Day when its full disclosure comes, those who forgot it beforehand will say, “The messengers of our Lord indeed brought the truth! Have we any intercessors who might intercede for us? Or might we be returned, that we might do other than what we used to do?” They have surely lost their souls, and that which they used to fabricate has forsaken them.

53 The full disclosure thereof—that is, of the Book mentioned in v. 52—refers to the fulfillment of its commands, and especially its promises and threats regarding resurrection, judgment, reward, and punishment in the Hereafter (Ṭs, Z). Here full disclosure translates taʾwīl, which is used elsewhere to refer to the interpretation of Divine Revelation (see 3:7 and commentary) as well as to the prophet Joseph’s ability to interpret dreams (taʾwīl al-ahādīth; 12:36). In the Islamic tradition, there are extensive discussions regarding the meaning of taʾwīl. While taʾwīl is sometimes used to mean simply “interpretation,” it can also refer to more intellectual or speculative interpretations of Quranic verses, rather than
interpretations transmitted from the Prophet or early authorities. For Shiites and Sufis, it came primarily to signify the inner, esoteric, or hidden meanings of the Quran as opposed to its more literal, outward, and exoteric interpretation (tafsīr).

In the present verse, the “hidden meaning” (ta’wīl) of the Book can be understood to refer to those events, such as Resurrection and Judgment, of which the Quran speaks, but whose reality has not been fully revealed, as they have not yet come to pass. When the full disclosure of the Book comes—that is, when its inner meanings are revealed and the unseen things it describes become manifest—the disbelievers’ “veil of doubt” will be lifted (Qu), and they will openly recognize the truth brought by the messengers (cf. v. 43). But at that point, it will be too late for them—no weeping or supplicating can avert their punishment (Qu).

They will seek intercessors on their behalf, although in 2:48 the Quran describes this Day as a Day when no intercession shall be accepted for a soul. The Quran does, however, indicate elsewhere that there is a limited possibility of intercession (see 2:255c). The Islamic tradition generally holds that the Prophet (and for Shiites also the Imams) may intercede on behalf of the members of the Islamic community, but there is no such intercession for those who have rejected the messengers, denied the revelations they brought, and thus neglected the meeting with this Day of theirs (v. 51).

The disbelievers ask if they can return to earthly life, so that they might live righteously and do other than what they used to do (see also 6:27–28; 26:102; 35:37). But then it is too late, for they have surely lost their souls, and even if they were returned, the Quran suggests elsewhere that they would simply return to their faithless and evil ways (6:28). On this day, that which they used to fabricate, including false idols and false religious beliefs, will abandon them and be of no use to them—an idea repeated in 6:24; 10:30; 11:21; 16:87; 28:75.

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Truly your Lord is God, Who created the heavens and the earth in six days, then mounted the Throne. He causes the night to cover the day, which pursues it swiftly; and the sun, the moon, and the stars are made subservient by His Command. Do not creation and command belong to Him? Blessed is God, Lord of the worlds!

As here, Quranic references to the creation of the heavens and the earth in six days (cf. 10:3; 11:7; 25:59; 32:4; 50:38; 57:4) are usually followed by the
statement that God then mounted the Throne (10:3; 25:59; 32:4). Since mounting the Throne suggests the physical movement and location of a body, while God has no body according to Islamic thought, many commentators note that this phrase is a symbol for God’s demonstration of His Sovereignty over His creation (Ṭs). For a fuller discussion of the Throne, see 2:255c.

That God created the heavens and the earth in six days is similar in certain ways to the Biblical creation narrative in which God creates the world in six days, but then rests on the seventh. The Quran, however, attributes no such resting to God, for neither slumber overtakes Him nor sleep and protecting the heavens and the earth tires Him not (2:255); and in 50:38, mention of the creation in six days is followed by the statement that no fatigue touched Him. For this reason, there is no Sabbath (in the Jewish and Christian sense) in the Islamic tradition. The Quranic account also differs from the Biblical in that it provides no specific sequence for the creation of various phenomena on different days, although some Muslim commentators mention the association of certain days with the creation of various orders of creatures (IK). In the Islamic tradition, the six days are said to have begun on Sunday and continued through Friday (al-jumuʿah). On this Friday, Islamic tradition maintains that God created Adam and gathered together (jamaʿa, from the same root as al-jumuʿah) all creation (IK, T, Ṭs), although the name jumuʿah (from a root meaning “to gather”) seems more directly related to the fact that Friday was the day of congregational prayer. The tradition that Adam was created on this day nonetheless gave Friday a particular religious preeminence in Islam.

Although creation in six days has been understood literally by some (Ṭs), as it has in certain Jewish and Christian interpretations, the six days mentioned here are not necessarily meant to be understood as six twenty-four-hour periods, since the Quran also states, Truly a day with your Lord is as a thousand years of that which you reckon (22:47; see also 32:5); some thus consider each “day” to be as a thousand years (IK, Q, Sy)—the latter duration is also considered symbolic by some commentators (see 32:5c). The symbolic and not literal meaning of six days has been discussed in other Islamic sources, including the work of Islamic scientists. The description of God causing the night to cover the day is one of many instances where the Quran invokes the alternation of night and day as a sign of God’s Power and Beneficence (see, e.g., 2:164; 3:190; 10:6; 13:3; 17:12; 22:61; 24:44; 31:29; 35:13; 39:5; 45:5). That the sun, moon, and stars are made subservient to God is also found in 13:2; 29:61; 31:29; 35:13; 39:5.

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Call upon your Lord humbly and in secret. Truly He loves not the transgressors.
Calling upon God humbly and in secret is also an act attributed to those in dire need in 6:63. All sincere “calling upon God” entails humility, for it is based upon the realization of one’s dependence upon Him. The Prophet said, “There is nothing nobler before God than supplicatory prayer (du‘ā’), for supplication is worship” (R). Calling on God in secret suggests sincerity and lack of hypocrisy in the supplication (R), for it is not done “to be seen of men” (cf. 2:264; 4:38, 142; 8:47; 107:6); see also 19:3, where Zachariah implores God with a secret cry, as well as verses that approve of those who “fear God in secret” (5:94; 21:49). God loves not the transgressors; that is, those who exceed the proper bounds in anything (Z). Both crying out in an unnecessarily loud manner and being excessively long and elaborate in one’s supplication are discouraged, according to some. The Prophet once criticized those who were excessive in supplication, and said, “It is sufficient for a man to say, ‘O God, I ask Thee [to grant me] the Garden and whatever words or works draw me near to it; and I seek refuge in Thee from the Fire and from whatever words or works draw me near to it’” (Z).

And work not corruption upon the earth after it has been set aright, but call upon Him in fear and in hope. Surely the Mercy of God is ever nigh unto the virtuous.

The warning to work not corruption upon the earth can be understood in a general way to mean avoiding idolatry or polytheism and acting in obedience to God (Ṭ), but “working corruption upon the earth” is elsewhere associated with morally egregious acts and serious sins, particularly violence against others (see 5:32–33c) as well as inciting others to do the same and thus spreading corruption upon the earth. Al-Rāzī considers the warning against “working corruption upon the earth” to be a prohibition against any act that corrupts bodies (through violence), wealth (through fraud or theft), religion (through disbelief and innovation), lineage (through adultery and slander), and intellect (through intoxication). “Working corruption upon the earth” may also be understood as referring to human actions that pollute or destroy the natural environment. The human ability to “work corruption upon the earth” is juxtaposed here with the earth’s having been set aright, that is, by God. God’s “setting aright” can thus mean His establishment, through the revelations and laws brought by His messengers, of a just and moral social order (Ṭ) as well as His creating the harmony and balance that pervades the natural order. In light of mankind’s contemporary capability to corrupt the earth physically through environmentally destructive behavior, this verse might therefore also be taken to mean that human beings should not physically
corrupt the earth itself after God had “set it aright” with regard to its beauty, its inherent balance and harmony, and its beneficence for mankind—all of which are alluded to in many places throughout the Quran (see, e.g., 16:3–18; 55:5–24). For further commentary on the Quranic warning against “working corruption upon the earth,” see 30:41c.

Just as one is instructed to call upon God humbly and in secret in v. 55, here one is enjoined to supplicate Him in fear and in hope. From the Islamic perspective, fear and hope can be considered the twin poles of human religious consciousness, as believers should always be suspended between fear of God’s Wrath and hope in His Mercy. According to a ḥadīth qudsī (sacred ḥadīth), “When God decreed the created realm, He prescribed for Himself in a Book that is with Him, ‘My Mercy prevails over My Wrath’” (see also 6:12–13c), an idea supported by the statement here that the Mercy of God is ever nigh unto the virtuous. A constant balance between fear and hope, moreover, is considered spiritually beneficial in that it prevents a person from falling into either moral lassitude or spiritual despair. See 32:16, which praises those whose sides shun [their] beds, who call upon their Lord out of fear and hope and who spend from that which We have provided them. If God’s Mercy is nigh unto the virtuous in particular, it is because God singles out for His Mercy whomsoever He will (2:105; 3:74); and God may cause whomsoever He will to enter into His Mercy (48:25; see also 42:8; 76:31), though His Mercy encompasses all things (v. 156).

He it is Who sends the winds as glad tidings ahead of His Mercy, so that when they bear heavy-laden clouds, We may drive them toward a land that is dead, and send down water upon it, and thereby bring forth every kind of fruit. Thus shall We bring forth the dead, that haply you may remember.

The idea that God sends forth the winds as glad tidings ahead of His Mercy is also found in 25:48; 27:63; 30:46. In these verses, God’s Mercy is closely associated with rain, which al-Zamakhsharī describes as among the most majestic and beautiful of God’s blessings. The mention of winds in the plural form is generally a sign or harbinger of Divine Mercy and Bounty, although wind in the singular is also invoked in certain verses as a destructive force under God’s command (see, e.g., 3:117; 30:48–49c; 35:9c). Similarly, the heavy-laden clouds
portend life-giving rain, reviving a land that is dead. Here, as in many other places, the revival of drought-stricken lands through rain is offered as a metaphor and a symbolic proof for the resurrection of human beings after their death (see, e.g., 30:19; 35:9; 43:11; 50:11). But a rainstorm can also prove destructive—thus it is something to be both feared and hoped for—and the image of a gathering storm invoked in this verse may also serve as a potent reminder that one must always call upon God in fear and in hope (v. 56). See 13:12 and 30:24, where lightning, which also signals a coming storm, and therefore rain, is said to engender both fear and hope. That haply you may remember refers to remembrance of the resurrection, remembrance that may be encouraged by reflecting on the revival of dead land.

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58 As for the good land, its vegetation comes forth by the leave of its Lord. And as for the bad, it comes forth but sparsely. Thus do We vary the signs for a people who give thanks.

This verse continues the metaphor of rain and its revival of dead land, but adds a word of warning to this image. Although the rain, as a symbol of God’s Mercy, falls upon the land and causes it to bring forth every kind of fruit (v. 57), the quality and abundance of the vegetation produced also depends on the quality or receptivity of the land, which symbolizes the human heart and its receptivity to Divine Mercy and Revelation. When rain falls upon good land, like His Mercy upon a believing heart, it produces fruits by the leave of its Lord; but when it falls upon bad land, or a disbelieving and “hardened” heart, its fruits come forth but sparsely. Commentators also connect the coming of Divine Mercy, the descent of the rain, and the descent of the Quran and indicate that the Quran’s words are meant to take root in the soul of believers and bear fruit through their thoughts and actions, but will bring no benefit to those who are predisposed to disbelief (R, T). See 2:26: As for those who believe, they know it is the truth from their Lord, and as for those who disbelieve, they say, “What did God mean by this parable?” He misleads many by it, and He guides many by it, and He misleads none but the iniquitous. The parable in the present verse is similar to the well-known Gospel parable of the sower in Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8.

That God “varies the signs” means that He demonstrates the truth in multiple ways, including through the use of symbols and parables, for a people who give thanks—that is, for those inclined to reflect upon the spiritual meaning of natural phenomena (Z). This parable concerning the varying receptivity of hearts to Divine
Mercy can be read as an opening commentary on the following series of accounts (in vv. 59–169) of communities who rejected the messages of warning that God had sent to them through various prophets. For these communities, like the bad land in this verse, the prophetic warnings from God yielded sparse results among them.

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59 Indeed, We sent Noah unto his people, and he said, “O my people! Worship God! You have no god other than Him. Truly I fear for you the punishment of a tremendous day!”

59 This verse begins a long section (vv. 59–136) that details the missions of several prophets who were rejected by those to whom they were sent and whose rejection brought terrible punishments upon their people. The accounts of these prophets and their missions as presented here share many thematic and textual similarities that serve to underline the fundamental unity of purpose shared by all prophets as well as the common human tendencies that often have led various communities to reject the prophets and dismiss their warnings. Similar serial presentations of these “punishment accounts” are found in 11:25–100; 26:105–90; 54:9–42.

As in all serial presentations of these punishment accounts, this section begins with the story of Noah, his call to his people to worship the One God, and his warning of a punishment to come if they did not heed his call. The story of Noah in vv. 59–64 represents the first narrative account of Noah in the textual order of the Quran; other accounts of Noah’s story can be found in 10:71–73; 11:25–48; 23:23–30; 26:105–21; 54:9–15; and in Sūrah 71. Noah is identified in the Islamic tradition as Nūḥ ibn Lamak (Lamech) ibn Mitūshalah (Methushael) ibn Ukhnūk (Enoch), the last being identified in the Islamic tradition with Idrīs, a Quranic prophet (19:56; 21:85; IK, R, Z). Others trace Noah’s lineage back to Adan through the latter’s son Shīth (Seth; IK, Th). Noah is also said to have been a carpenter and to have been fifty years old at the time of his prophetic call (Th, Z). In the chronological line of prophets, Noah is said to have been the prophet sent by God after Idrīs (Ţs).

In this narrative, Noah’s initial call to his people is an injunction to worship the One God, including a modified version of the Islamic testament of faith: You have no god other than Him (see also 11:26; 23:23). This call, which is also made by Hūd in v. 65, Sāliḥ in v. 73, and Shu‘ayb in v. 85, functions as a unifying element of the prophetic narratives in this section. That the missions of these prophets, like that
of Muhammad, are founded upon a call to worship the One God indicates the fundamental unity of the messages brought by the prophets and furthers the Islamic understanding of Muhammad as a restorer of the one original and true religion brought by all the prophets, rather than as the founder of an entirely “new” one; see 46:9, where Muhammad is instructed to say I am no innovation among the messengers, and the essay “The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions.” Although the Biblical account of Noah makes no mention of his people’s worship of other gods, the Quran indicates that they worshipped false deities whom Noah’s opponents mention by name in 71:23 as Wadd, Suwāʾ, Yagūth, Yaʿqūb, and Naṣr. According to some, these were the names of their ancestors whom Noah’s people had, over time, come to worship (IK). The punishment of a tremendous day may refer to the earthly punishment of the flood, the punishment decreed on the Day of Judgment (R, Z), or both.

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60 The notables among his people said, “Truly we think that you are in manifest error.”

61 He said, “O my people! There is no error in me, but rather I am a messenger from the Lord of the worlds.

62 I deliver unto you the messages of my Lord, and advise you sincerely, and I know from God what you know not.

60–62 The notables among his people are the ones who voice their opposition to Noah’s call, perhaps as representatives of his community at large. It is the notables or “leaders” who articulate their people’s rejection of the prophets in most of the punishment accounts in this sūrah (see vv. 66, 75, 88, 103) and elsewhere in the Quran (see 10:75, 88; 11:27, 38, 97; 23:24, 33, 46; 26:34; 28:20, 32; 38:6; 43:23, 46). See also 6:123, in which the great ones are said to be among the guilty in every town. The prophetic narratives in the Quran were meant, in part, to console and reassure the Prophet as he faced the rejection of his own people (R, Ṭs), and the repeated mention of the notables as being among the previous prophets’ most outspoken critics may have been of particular comfort to Muhammad as he struggled with the leaders or notables of the Quraysh and their persistent opposition to the message he brought. As in all such cases, however, the recounting of God’s assistance to the righteous against those who reject His
religion could serve as comfort for all believers.

The people of Noah consider him to be in manifest error for having rejected worship of their idols (Ṭs), but Noah responds that his function as a messenger from the Lord of the worlds is simply to deliver . . . the messages of my Lord—as is the case with all prophets (IK; cf. 3:20; 13:40; 29:18)—and to serve as a “sincere adviser” to them. Similar claims of being a “sincere” or “trustworthy” adviser to their people are made by Noah in 11:34, Hūd in vv. 67–68, and Ṣāliḥ in vv. 79, 93. The prophets’ description as “sincere advisers” to their people may be contrasted with Satan’s false claim to be a sincere adviser to Adam and Eve in v. 21. Noah’s warning, I know from God what you know not refers, most directly, to the great punishment that is about to come upon his people (Th).

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Or do you marvel that a reminder from your Lord should come unto you by means of a man from among yourselves, so as to warn you, that you might be reverent, and that haply you may receive mercy?”

63 Here Noah challenges his people by articulating one basis of their rejection of his message, namely, that they cannot believe that God would send a message by means of a man like themselves (see 11:27 and 23:24, where they state this objection themselves). See also v. 69, where Hūd makes an identical challenge to his people. The Quraysh who rejected the Prophet Muhammad also did so, in part, because they were incredulous that God would send His message through a human being like themselves, rather than by means of or accompanied by an angel (see 6:8; 11:12; 17:94–95; 25:7), or by someone who enjoyed greater prestige among them than did Muhammad (see 43:31). That Noah and Hūd (in v. 69) faced similar attitudes from their people was also meant, like other elements of these prophetic narratives, to strengthen the resolve of the Prophet in the face of his own struggles with the Quraysh.

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Yet they denied him. So We saved him and those who were with him in the Ark, and We drowned those who denied Our signs. Truly they were a blind people.

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64  Noah’s people continued their denial and so were drowned in the ensuing flood; see 54:11–12 for descriptions of the flood and the Islamic understanding of this event. God spares Noah, however, and those who were with him in the Ark, as we also find in the Biblical account (Genesis 7–9). In the punishment accounts in the Quran, the prophets are always saved from the destruction brought upon their people, as are their believing family members or other followers, for as the Quran asks rhetorically, Were the Punishment of God to come upon you suddenly or openly, would any be destroyed save the wrongdoing people? (6:47). In Noah’s case, those spared along with him included members of his family (11:40), except for one of his sons (see 11:42–43) and perhaps his wife, whom the Quran describes as a disbeliever in 66:10. Those aboard the ark are said to have included his three sons, Sām (Shem), Hām (Ham), and Yāfath (Japheth), perhaps their wives, and six other believers (Ṭ, Z). Other accounts indicate that there were eighty people (forty men and forty women) saved in the ark (IK, Z). As in the Biblical account, the Ark in which Noah, his family, and a handful of believers were saved is described as a wooden vessel (54:13) built by Noah himself, upon God’s command (11:37–38; 23:27).

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65  And unto ʿĀd, their brother, Hūd. He said, “O my people! Worship God! You have no god other than Him. Will you not be reverent?”

65  Hūd is an Arab prophet whose story is also told in some detail in 11:50–60; 26:123–39; 46:21–25; 54:18–21. Although Hūd has no counterpart in the Biblical text, the Islamic tradition maintains that he and his people are descendants of Noah through the latter’s son Sām (Shem; IK, Ts). In one account, the lineage of Hūd is given as Hūd ibn Shalikh (Shaleh) ibn Arfakhshad (Arpachshad) ibn Sām (Shem) ibn Nūḥ (Noah; Ts, Z), with all of his ancestors having Biblical counterparts (see Genesis 10:21–24). Another account identifies Hūd as Hūd ibn ʿĀd ibn Iram ibn ʿAwṣ ibn Sām ibn Nūḥ (IK, Ts), based on 89:6–7: Hast thou not seen how thy Lord dealt with ʿĀd, Iram the pillared. Hūd’s call to his people to worship the One God is identical to that of Noah in v. 59 (see commentary on this verse). The ʿĀd people are said to have originated in southern Arabia, between Ḥaḍramawt in southern Yemen and Oman (IK, Z). This was a region with many sand dunes (aḥqāf; Th)—the latter being the name of Sūrah 46, which includes an account of the ʿĀd (IK, Z).
The notables among his people who disbelieved said, “Truly we think that you are foolish, and we consider you to be among the liars.”

He said, “O my people! There is no foolishness in me, but rather I am a messenger from the Lord of the worlds.

I deliver unto you the messages of my Lord, and truly I am a trustworthy adviser unto you.

66–68 Hūd’s people reject his call by claiming that he is foolish and among the liars, whereas Noah’s people had accused him of being in error (v. 60). The response of both prophets is similar, however, denying their people’s accusations and asserting that their purpose is simply to deliver the messages from God and to serve as a sincere or trustworthy adviser to their people—qualities Ibn Kathīr notes are common to all prophets (see 7:60–62c). Noah, however, is said to have been rejected by the notables among his people in general, while Hūd is opposed only by the notables among his people who disbelieved (also in 23:33), since some of the leading members of Hūd’s people were reportedly believers in his message (Z).

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Or do you marvel that a reminder from your Lord should come to you by means of a man from among yourselves, so as to warn you? Remember when He made you vicegerents after the people of Noah, and increased you amply in stature. So remember the boons of God, that haply you may prosper.”

69 Like Noah, Hūd challenges his people’s inability to accept that God would send a message through a mere human being like themselves (see 7:63c). The people of Ēd were made vicegerents after the people of Noah, meaning that they were their successors on the earth and inherited a position of sovereignty (Z)—both successorship and inheritance being implied in the Arabic word for vicegerents.
(khulafā’). That God increased them *amply in stature* refers to their reportedly gigantic size. Legendary accounts say that the smallest of them was 60 and the largest 100 cubits in height, or between 120 and 200 feet tall (Ṭs, Z). The *boons of God* thus refer to their succession and sovereignty on the earth and their great size (Z). In addition to calling his people to monotheistic worship, Hūd is also said to have warned them against behaving oppressively toward others. Some accounts report that because of their large size, they were able to conquer much territory beyond their native region (IK).

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They said, “Have you come unto us so that we may worship God alone, and leave aside what our fathers worshipped? Then bring upon us that wherewith you have threatened us, if you are truthful.”

70 The people of ʿĀd respond to Hūd’s call in ways that are common to many communities of disbelievers who reject their prophets. Their first response is a stated unwillingness to abandon the false gods and deities worshipped by their fathers (see also, e.g., 2:170; 5:104; 7:28; 10:78; 11:62, 87; 14:10; 31:21; 34:43; 43:22). The claims of those who observe false religious practices that they should be excused on the basis that they were simply “following their fathers” is never accepted in any context in the Quran. Vv. 172–73 recount God’s taking a pretemporal covenant with all of humanity in which they acknowledged His Lordship, because of which the excuse that people’s forefathers had misled them in their religious beliefs could never be accepted. The second response of Hūd’s people is to challenge the prophet to bring about the punishment and destruction with which he has threatened them (cf. 46:22); the same challenge is issued to Noah in 11:32, and a nearly identical statement is made to Śāliḥ in v. 77. Such audacious challenges to the warnings brought by the prophets indicate a complete lack of faith, and in response to similar challenges elsewhere the Quran intimates that there is danger in seeking to hasten God’s punishment; see 10:48–50; 21:37–38; 27:71–72, and especially 46:24, where the cloud that brings the destructive wind upon the ʿĀd is described to them as *what you sought to hasten*.

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71 He said, “Defilement and wrath have already come upon
you from your Lord. Do you dispute with me over names that you have named—you and your fathers—for which God has sent down no authority? Then wait! Truly I am waiting along with you.”

Defilement translates rijs, which can mean a state of filth that results from a physical soiling or the shame that stems from moral disgrace. Commentators note, however, that rijs overlaps in meaning with the similar Quranic term rijz (Ṭ), which means both filth or defilement and punishment (see 29:33–34c). In the present context, then, rijs is said, like rijz, to refer to the imminent punishment or Divine Wrath that has already been engendered by the ʿĀd’s rejection of Hūd and that will soon be visited upon them (IK, Ṭ, Th, Z). The idolatry of the ʿĀd, which they defend as the worship what our fathers worshipped (v. 70), is dismissed by Hūd as the worship of mere names that you have named (cf. 12:40; 53:23), for God is the only legitimate recipient of worship and He alone gives and teaches human beings the “names” of all things (2:31). The names that you have named and for which God has sent down no authority thus have no ontological reality, and worshipping them is futile, for they can bring neither harm nor benefit (IK, Ṭ). Hūd tells his people, by way of a threat (IK), Wait! Truly I am waiting along with you; that is, “Wait for God to judge between us” (Ṭ). The Prophet Muhammad is instructed to respond to his people in a similar manner on several occasions; see 6:158; 9:52; 10:20, 102; 11:122; 52:31.

So We saved him and those who were with him through a mercy from Us, and We cut off the last remnant of those who denied Our signs and were not believers.

That God cut off the last remnant of those who denied the signs brought by Hūd refers to their collective punishment by means of a fierce wind that destroyed all but Hūd and those who were with him (cf. 41:16; 54:19; 69:6–7). According to some accounts, when the ʿĀd rejected Hūd’s call, God punished them with drought for three years. A group of them went to Makkah to pray and beseech God to relieve them, although they continued to disbelieve in Hūd and his warning. In response to their prayers three clouds appeared, one white, one red, and one black, and a heavenly herald asked them to choose among them. They chose the black cloud, which God then drove until it reached their town. Its inhabitants
initially took the cloud to be a good sign and a harbinger of life-giving rain (cf. 46:24), but the cloud soon brought down upon them a violent, destructive wind that is described in another verse as *tearing out people as if they were uprooted palm trunks* (54:20; Bg, IK, Th, Ts, Z). Thereafter, Hūd and the believers among his people were said to have traveled to Makkah and to have worshipped there until they died (Z).

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73 And unto Thamūd, their brother, Ṣāliḥ. He said, “O my people! Worship God! You have no god other than Him. There has come unto you a clear proof from your Lord. This she-camel of God is a sign unto you. Leave her to graze freely on God’s earth, and cause her no harm, lest a painful punishment seize you.

This verse begins the account of the Arabian prophet Ṣāliḥ, sent to his people, the Thamūd, who, like the tribe of ḤĀd, were reportedly descendants of Noah’s son Shem (Ţ, Z). Ṣāliḥ’s full name is given as Ṣāliḥ ibn ʿUbayd ibn Asif ibn Māsikh ibn ʿUbayd ibn Khādir ibn Thamūd (Th). He is described as having been among the noblest and most well respected members of the Thamūd prior to his prophetic mission (Ţ, Th), which began when he was still a youth (Th). The Thamūd were said to inhabit a high rocky plain known as al-Ḥijr located in western Arabia, between the Ḥijāz and Syria. Al-Ḥijr is also the title of Sūrah 15; and 15:80–83 briefly recounts the story of the Thamūd, who are identified in this passage as *the inhabitants of al-Ḥijr*. Other narrative accounts of Ṣāliḥ are found in 11:61–68; 26:141–58; 54:23–31. Ṣāliḥ’s account, like that of Noah and Hūd before him, begins with a call to monotheistic belief and worship (see also vv. 59, 65; 11:61).

*Clear proof* is used throughout the Quran to refer to scriptural revelations, prophetic warnings, and miracles given to the prophets to convince their people (see, e.g., 2:87; 3:105; 4:153; 5:32; 6:157; 7:101; 9:70; 10:13; 14:9; 16:44; 19:73). In the case of Ṣāliḥ, the *clear proof* was the pregnant *she-camel* that he miraculously brought forth from a large rock after his people had requested a sign confirming his prophethood (Ţ, Z; see also 26:154). Insofar as the Thamūd are eventually destroyed for slaughtering the *she-camel* that they had requested as a sign, the story serves as one of many Quranic warnings about those who treat the signs of God with disdain as well as a more particular warning about the danger of
asking for signs and the necessity of believing in them once they have been granted (see also 5:112–15c).

The Thamūd are instructed to allow the camel to graze freely on God’s earth without harm (see also 11:64). The command to treat the sacred she-camel in this way bears similarities to the pagan Arab practices of allowing certain camels to roam and graze without interference, while forbidding their use or slaughter, although the Quran criticizes these latter practices for the arbitrary manner in which the sacrosanct nature of such animals was assigned to them by the pagan Arabs themselves (see 5:103c; 6:138c). In the case of Šāliḥ and his people, however, the she-camel is a miraculously produced sign for the Thamūd, whom Šāliḥ warns of a painful punishment if they were to harm her in any way (see also 26:156). They were also instructed to allow the she-camel sole access to the drinking well every other day and to alternate access to the well between themselves and the camel (54:28; 26:155). Although the she-camel, after having drunk from the well, would produce abundant milk to supply all the Thamūd, they grew resentful of sharing the well and complained that the camel’s enormous size tended to frighten off their other livestock (Ṭ, Z).

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74 Remember when He made you vicegerents after ēĀd and settled you on the earth: you build castles for yourselves on the open plain and hew dwellings in the mountains. So remember the boons of God, and behave not wickedly upon the earth, working corruption.”

74 Šāliḥ, like Hūd, reminds his people of the boons of God (cf. v. 69), among which is that He made them vicegerents after ēĀd, meaning that they were given sovereignty after them, just as the ēĀd had been vicegerents after Noah (see v. 69 and commentary). Among the boons of God was also their famed building ability, including their construction of dwellings in the mountains (cf. 15:82; 26:149; 89:9), vestiges of which were known to the Arabs of the Prophet’s time and indeed remain to the present day. The Prophet and his army are said to have stopped near the remains of their mountain abodes on their way to an anticipated military campaign in Tabūk in 9/631. The Prophet, however, forbade his followers from drinking or using water from their wells and would not allow them to approach the well used by the sacred she-camel, lest they suffer the same fate as the Thamūd (IK). For a discussion of the Quranic concept of working corruption, see 7:56c.
The notables among his people who were arrogant said to those among them who believed and whom they deemed weak, “Do you know that Ṣāliḥ has been sent by his Lord?” They said, “Truly we believe in that wherewith he has been sent.”

Those who were arrogant said, “Truly we believe not in that which you believe.”

75–76 As with Noah and Hūd, it is especially the notables among Ṣāliḥ’s people who are too proud to accept his message (see v. 60; 7:60–62c; as well as vv. 66, 88, 90); and v. 75 suggests that those among the Thamūd who did believe in his prophethood were those deemed weak, that is, considered to be of lower social and economic standing (Ṭ). There are reports that some leading figures among the Thamūd believed, but they were overwhelmed by others, including the keeper of their idols, who strongly rejected Ṣāliḥ (IK, Th).

So they hamstrung the she-camel and insolently defied the Command of their Lord. And they said, “O Ṣāliḥ! Bring upon us that wherewith you have threatened us, if you are among those sent [by God].”

So the earthquake seized them, and morning found them lying lifeless in their abode.

77–78 Despite the divisions among the Thamūd regarding Ṣāliḥ and the message he brought, the commentators report that all the Thamūd eventually consented to a plot to hamstring and kill the she-camel (IK, Th, Z), thus indicating their collective guilt and liability to Divine punishment. According to some accounts, the killing of the she-camel was instigated by two women, one of whom was the wife of Dhiʾāb ibn ʿAmr, one of the leading disbelievers among the
Thamūd (see 7:75–76c). She is said to have recruited a young man, who in turn recruited eight others, to carry out the slaughter; see 27:48, which refers to a group of nine persons working corruption among the Thamūd. After killing the she-camel, the camel’s young offspring ran off in distress and eventually disappeared. Śāliḥ then realized that the punishment of which he had been warning was imminent; he told his people that it would be visited upon them in three days, and that on each successive morning until that time, they would wake with their faces having turned yellow, then red, and finally black before their final destruction (IK, Ṭ, Th, Z). Like other peoples who rejected their prophets, the Thamūd revealed their disbelief by calling upon Śāliḥ to prove the truth of his prophethood by bringing upon them the punishment about which he had warned them (see 7:70c). After Śāliḥ issued his final warning, the same nine men who slaughtered the she-camel are said to have attempted to kill Śāliḥ himself, calculating spitefully that even if Śāliḥ’s warnings of imminent destruction were true, they would at least succeed in hastening Śāliḥ’s own death. Their attempt was thwarted, in one account, when the would-be assassins, on their way to kill Śāliḥ, were stoned to death by angels (Th).

As Śāliḥ had warned, the people woke on the third day with blackened faces and prepared themselves for death. Knowing that their punishment was certain and imminent, they laid themselves out on the floor in expectation of their demise. Earthquake here translates rajfah, and the destructive event was said to have entailed not only a violent shaking, but also a loud sound, like the crack of lightning accompanied by the cry of all living things on earth, which stopped the hearts of the people instantly in their breasts (Th), leaving them lying lifeless in their abode (see also 11:67). The same fate is said to have befallen the people of Midian in 7:91; 11:94; 29:37.

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So he turned away from them and said, “O my people! I indeed delivered unto you the message of my Lord, and advised you sincerely, but you love not sincere advisers.”

79 Śāliḥ’s “turning away from them” may refer to his abandonment of the Thamūd in advance of their punishment, leaving their settlement along with a small number of believers (Ṭ, Z); or it may refer to his reaction to the destruction of his people, either when he turned back, saw smoke rising from their residences, and knew that they had been destroyed or after returning to find them lying lifeless in their abode (v. 78; Z). Like Noah and Hūd before him, Śāliḥ affirmed that he has fulfilled his responsibility to God and his people, having delivered . . . the
message of my Lord and advised his people sincerely—the two essential vocations of the Quranic prophets (see v. 68; 7:60–62c). But although Noah and Ḥūd make their statements in a mood of warning, Ṣāliḥ says this with sadness and regret that, for all his efforts, he could not persuade his people to mend their ways (Z), or he says it by way of posthumous chastisement for his people’s stubborn disbelief (IK).

That the dead can hear such rebukes from the living is supported by the report that the Prophet addressed the dead at the Battle of Badr, asking them if they had found God’s Promise to be true. When ʿUmar expressed surprise at the Prophet’s addressing the dead, the Prophet replied that the dead could hear as well as the living, even if they could not respond (IK).

Some reports indicate that Ṣāliḥ and those who believed in him returned to the settlement of the Thamūd and took up residence in the homes of those who had been killed (Z), while others suggest that Ṣāliḥ, like other Arabian prophets whose people were destroyed, migrated to Makkah and settled there (IK).

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And Lot, when he said to his people, “What! Do you commit an indecency such as none in the world committed before you?

Verily you come with desire unto men instead of women. Indeed, you are a prodigal people!”

80–81 Lot (Lūṭ in Arabic) is the nephew of Abraham, and his people refers to the people of Sodom. Lot reportedly settled in Sodom, but was unrelated to its native inhabitants. Lot’s full name is given as Lūṭ ibn Hārān ibn Āzar or Tirākh (Terah, the Biblical name of Abraham’s father; IK, Ṭs); another report identifies him as Abraham’s maternal cousin and as the brother of Abraham’s wife Sarah (Sārā; Ṭs). For other narrative accounts of Lot and his people, see 11:77–83; 15:57–77; 26:160–73; 27:54–58; 29:28–35; 37:133–38; 54:33–38; and the similar Biblical narrative in Genesis 19. Lot is said to have become a believer along with Abraham and to have traveled with him to Syria (Ṭs); but while Abraham went on to Palestine, Lot turned toward Jordan (Th). He is said to have been sent by God as a messenger to Sodom and the surrounding towns to call them to worship the One God, and abandon their sinful and prodigal behavior (IK, Ṭs).

The indecency for which Lot chastises his people is that of men coming with desire unto men instead of women, understood by the traditional commentators to
refer to the practice of homosexuality (Ṭ; cf. 26:165–66; 27:55; 29:29) and sodomy specifically (Th, Ṭs), a practice that the verse indicates originated with the Sodomites of Lot’s time. One report indicates that the people of Sodom engaged in this practice only with those who were outsiders in their town (Ṭs), which is consistent with their having demanded access to the angels who had visited Lot, whom they clearly perceived as foreigners (see commentary on 11:77–78; 15:61–70); other commentators, however, suggest that the men of Sodom preferred sexual relations with men to relations with women on a regular basis (IK, Th). The aggressive behavior of the men of Sodom in the Biblical account as well as in 11:77–79 and 15:67–71 has led some to speculate that the real crime of the people of Lot was forcible sodomy, rather than consensual homosexual relations. Although the emphasis in v. 81 as well as in parallel accounts in 26:165–66; 27:55; 29:29 is explicitly on the act of men desiring men instead of women, the insolent and violent manner in which the men of Sodom sought to fulfill their desires is clearly implied in the account of Lot found in 11:77–80. Lot describes them as a prodigal people, understood to mean that they transgressed the limits of what is lawful to consume or enjoy by having sexual relations with men, rather than with women, the latter being those made lawful for them (Ṭs). Prodigal translates musrifūn, which can also mean to be excessive and wasteful (see 7:31c; 10:12c). Al-Zamakhsharī describes “prodigality” (isrāf) as the root of all evil, and in 6:141 and 7:31 it is said that God loves not the prodigal.

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82 And the reply of his people was but to say, “Expel them from your town! Truly they are a people who keep themselves pure.”

82 The threat or plan to expel them—that is, the family of Lot (cf. 26:167; 27:56)—extended, according to some commentators, to a group of believing followers of Lot as well (Ṭ, Z). The disbelievers among the people of Sodom also deride Lot and his followers’ moral probity, describing them as those who keep themselves pure (cf. 27:56). Their “purity,” according to some commentators, was a reference to their refusal to participate in the sexual practices of the Sodomites (Ṭ, Z).

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83 So We saved him and his family, except for his wife;
she was among those who lagged behind.

83 As with the other prophets discussed in this section, God saved Lot and his family, which is widely understood as including the believers who followed Lot as well as his immediate family (T). Lot’s wife, however, was one of those who lagged behind and thus perished with the rest of Sodom (see also 15:60; 26:171; 27:57; 29:32). She is said to have followed the religion of Lot, at least outwardly, but to have been inwardly a disbeliever (T, Ts); also see 29:31–32c. In the Biblical account, Lot’s wife left with him, but turned to look back and so became a pillar of salt (Genesis 19:26). A similar version of events is also mentioned by some commentators (Z) and is suggested in 15:65, where Lot is commanded: So set out with thy family during the night, and follow behind them, and let not any of you turn around, but go forth wheresoever you are commanded.

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84 And We sent down a rain upon them; so behold how the guilty fared in the end.

84 That Lot’s people were destroyed by a catastrophic rain, described by commentators as a rain of stones (T, Ts, Z), is also found in 11:82 and 15:74 (in both these verses it is a rain of stones of baked clay) as well as in 26:173 and 27:58. In 29:34, they are destroyed by a torment from Heaven, and in 54:34, by a torrent of stones. The command to behold how the guilty fared in the end is repeated verbatim or in similar form in several verses and is often preceded by the mention of “journeying upon the earth,” indicating that the Arabs were able not only to reflect on the stories of these earlier peoples, but in some cases could see for themselves the ruins of their civilizations that remained in parts of Arabia (cf., e.g., 3:137; 6:11; 10:40; 16:36; 27:14). This command to consider the fate of the guilty is addressed to the Prophet, enjoining him to reflect on the fate of those who had rejected their messengers, even as he faced rejection by many of his own people. This and similar passages were meant as a warning that the people of Makkah could expect the same fate, should they persist in their denial of Muhammad’s prophethood (T).

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85 And unto Midian, their brother, Shu‘ayb. He said, “O
my people! Worship God! You have no god other than Him. There has come unto you a clear proof from your Lord. So observe fully the measure and the balance and diminish not people’s goods, nor work corruption upon the earth after it has been set aright. That is better for you, if you are believers.

85 Shuʿayb’s full name is given by the early historian Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767) as Shuʿayb ibn Mīkīl ibn Yashjār (or Yashḥab; Ṭ, Ṭs); others have identified him as Shuʿayb ibn Tawbah (or Buwayb or Nuwayb) ibn Midian (Th, Ṭs). Shuʿayb is referred to in Islamic tradition as the “Orator of the Prophets” (Khaṭīb al-anbiyāʾ) because of the eloquence and rhetorical power of his preaching (IK, Ṭ, Th). He is considered an Arab prophet, although the people of Midian are known in the Bible, and Shuʿayb is usually identified with the Biblical figure Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, since the Quran mentions that Moses met his future wife and father-in-law in the area of Midian (see 26:22–23). The people of Midian are said to have resided in northwestern Arabia, near Maʿān in Jordan (IK), and to have descended from Midian, a son of Abraham (Ṭ, Ṭs, Z). In Genesis 25:2, Midian is mentioned as a son born to Abraham through a wife named Keturah, whom Abraham takes after the death of Sarah; some rabbinic commentators have identified Keturah with Hagar, although most reject this opinion. Midian is said to have married the daughter of Lot (Ṭs, Z), thus making the Midianites descendants of both Lot and Abraham. According to some commentators Shuʿayb was sent to both the people of Midian and the people of al-Aykah, “the Thicket” (Ṭ, Ṭs, Z; cf. 15:78; 26:176; 38:13; 50:14), while others consider the two to be references to the same people (IK, Th). For other narrative accounts of Shuʿayb, see 11:84–95; 26:176–89.

Shuʿayb’s mission to the people of Midian begins, like that of Noah, Hūd, and Ṣāliḥ, with a call to worship the One God (cf. 29:36). Like Ṣāliḥ, he defends the truth of his message by asserting that a clear proof had come to them from God. As mentioned in 7:73c, clear proof is used throughout the Quran to refer to scriptural revelations, prophetic warnings, and miracles given to prophets to convince their people. Some commentators suggested that the clear proofs, in Shuʿayb’s case, may refer to evidentiary miracles (muʿjizāt) that he and, according to Islamic tradition, all prophets were given to perform as a confirmation of their prophethood, although no specific miracles are attributed to Shuʿayb in the Quran (Ṭs, Z).

The injunction to observe fully the measure and the balance is a call to integrity and honesty in commercial transactions, and by extension other dealings, an injunction also found in several other passages (see 6:151–52c; 17:35; 18:1–3;
That they should not diminish...people’s goods means that they should render to them in full the goods for which they had paid. Among the Quranic prophets, it is Shuʿayb whose mission is particularly associated with the call to avoid fraudulent commercial practices; see 11:84–85 and 26:181–83, where he makes an identical call to the people of Midian and al-Aykah (“the Thicket”), respectively. In the Bible and in Biblical commentaries, the Midianites were considered to be merchants who worked along the incense routes, an idea that is consistent with Shuʿayb’s particular call to them. The idea of measurement and balance is a prominent theme in the Quran, having not only commercial but also cosmological significance; several passages indicate that God measures out all created existence and sets the created order in balance (cf., e.g., 13:8; 15:19–21; 23:18; 25:2; 42:27; 54:49; 65:3; 73:20).

In some passages, a relationship is suggested between God’s measuring and balancing, and the moral requirement that human beings observe proper measure and balance; see 55:7–9. Shuʿayb’s warning against working corruption upon the earth is also part of his essential message, both to the people of Midian and those of al-Aykah; cf. 11:85; 26:183; 29:36. Sāliḥ similarly warns his people against “working corruption” in v. 74. For further discussion of “working corruption upon the earth,” see 7:56c. That the earth has been set aright—that is, by God—indicates not only that He has established balance and harmony in its natural order, but also that He has provided the means of “setting matters aright” in human society, through His prophets and the commands and prohibitions they establish (Ṭ, Z).

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86 And do not lie in wait on every path, threatening and turning away those who believe in Him from the way of God, and seeking to make it crooked. And remember when you were few, and He made you many. And behold how the workers of corruption fared in the end!

86 Shuʿayb further urges the people of Midian not to lie in wait on every path, threatening and diverting people from the way of God, which is the course of action to which Satan dedicates himself after he is expelled from the Divine Presence (see v. 16). In the specific case of the people of Midian, this may mean that they turned people away from the right path by denouncing Shuʿayb as a liar (Ṭs, Z) or by threatening or otherwise hindering those who came along the road seeking to become followers of Shuʿayb (IK, Ṭs). It may also mean that they
inhibited people journeying along the physical road by blocking it or collecting tithes (IK, Z), perhaps in an exploitative or threatening manner (IK), given their apparent penchant for unethical commercial practices and their reported location along important trade routes (see 7:85c).

Although the verse may refer to specific practices of the people of Midian, its more general spiritual significance is clear from the terms and phrases used to describe them. Path here translates ṣirāṭ, which in the Quran refers to the path to truth and serves as a symbol for a life lived according to Divine guidance; see commentary on 1:6–7. It is essentially synonymous with the way of God (sabīl Allāh), mentioned in this same verse. Although commentators assert that the path to God is a single “straight path,” ṣirāṭ mustaqīm (Z; see, e.g., 1:6; 2:142; 3:51; 4:68; 5:16), on every path here seems to suggest that there is more than one straight path. Al-Zamakhsharī explains that although the path is one, it has many branches, and it is this path with its branches to which reference is made here. The idea of seeking to make . . . crooked the way of God—understood to mean seeking to convince others that the way of God is crooked (Z)—is also found in 3:99; 7:45; 11:19; 14:3; see 7:45c.

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87 If a group of you believe in that wherewith I have been sent, and a group of you believe not, then be patient till God shall judge between us, and He is the best of judges.”

87 Shuʿayb instructs his people to be patient till God shall judge between us, that is, by aiding the believers and affirmers of truth over the disbelievers and champions of falsehood (Z). He says this as a means of warning the disbelievers (Z), but also of encouraging the believers (Ts). In the case of the Midianites, as with the people of Noah, Hūd, Śāliḥ, and Lot, Divine punishment takes various forms of earthly destruction from which the prophets and their followers are spared. The ominous instruction to “wait” or “be patient” is also made by Noah (v. 71) and by Muhammad, who is told to respond to the Quraysh’s continued denial in a similar manner in 6:158; 9:52; 10:20, 102; 11:122; 20:135; 52:31. That God is the best of judges is also stated in 10:109; 11:45; 12:80; 95:8. In 6:57 and 7:89, He is similarly said to be the best of deciders.

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88 The notables among his people who were arrogant said,
“We shall surely expel you, O Shu’ayb, and those who believe along with you from our town, unless you revert to our creed.” He said, “What! Even though we are unwilling?

We would be fabricating a lie against God were we to revert to your creed after God had delivered us from it. It is not for us to revert thereto unless God, our Lord, should will. Our Lord encompasses all things in knowledge. In God do we trust. Our Lord! Decide between us and our people in truth, and Thou art the best of deciders.”

88–89 For a discussion of the notables and their particularly outspoken opposition to the prophets in several Quranic narratives, see 7:60–62c. Shu’ayb, like Lot (v. 82), is threatened with having himself and his followers “expelled” from the town, unless he should revert to the creed and religious practices of the Midianites. Reverting to such a creed, Shu’ayb asserts, would amount to fabricating a lie against God, something the Quran identifies as among the greatest sins, for who does greater wrong than one who fabricates a lie against God? (6:21, 93, 144; 7:37; 10:17; 11:18; 18:15; 19:68; 61:7). Reverting in this way would also make Shu’ayb and his followers effectively “apostates,” who are, according to some commentators, worse than disbelievers, because such people presumably are capable of discerning true religion from false religion since they were followers of the former, but nonetheless have now renounced it and follow what they know to be false (Z). That God encompasses all things in knowledge is also found in 6:80; 20:98; 65:12. Shu’ayb’s exclamation in God do we trust demonstrates his confidence that God would protect and deliver him and his followers from the threats of the disbelievers (Th), but also points to the central spiritual virtue of trust in God (tawakkul); see 14:11–12c; 39:38c. His request to God that He decide between us and our people in truth is similar to his statement in v. 87 bidding his people to wait for God’s decision between the believers and the disbelievers.

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90 The notables among his people who disbelieved said, “Verily if you follow Shu’ayb, you shall surely be the
losers.”

90 The notables, or leaders among the disbelievers, warned that those who followed Shu'ayb would be the losers, meaning those who are deceived with regard to their religion, and that abandoning their native religious practice to follow Shu'ayb would lead to destruction (Ṭ). In v. 92, however, it is those who denied Shu'ayb who were the losers.

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91 So the earthquake seized them, and morning found them lying lifeless in their abode.

92 Those who denied Shu'ayb, it was as though they had never dwelt there. Those who denied Shu'ayb, they themselves were the losers.

91–92 The description of the destruction of the Midianites is identical to that of the Thamūd, the people of Ṣāliḥ. See v. 78 and commentary. It is reported that when the people of Midian denied Shu'ayb, God first sent upon them such a terrible heat that even shade and water could provide no relief. God then sent upon them a cloud, bearing cool, refreshing breezes. When all the people of Midian had gathered beneath this cloud, it unleashed upon them flame and fire (IK, Ṭ, Th), followed by a terrible cry and an earthquake that instantly extinguished their spirits and left them suddenly lifeless (IK). The people of Midian were so thoroughly effaced by the earthquake that it was as though they had never dwelt there. In response to the Midianite disbelievers’ description of Shu'ayb’s followers as the losers in v. 90, the present verse affirms that it is the disbelievers who were the losers, that is, deceived or deluded about true religion and destroyed as a result.

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93 So he turned away from them and said, “O my people! I indeed delivered unto you the messages of my Lord, and advised you sincerely. So how can I grieve for a disbelieving people?”
Shu‘ayb’s address to his people (except for the last sentence) is identical to that of Šāliḥ, and the same question arises as to whether this address was delivered after his people had been thoroughly destroyed or only after the prophet became certain that their destruction was imminent and unavoidable; see v. 79 and commentary.

We sent no prophet to a town but that We seized its people with misfortune and hardship, that haply they would humble themselves.

Then We replaced evil [circumstances] with good, till they multiplied and said, “Hardship and ease visited our fathers [as well].” Then We seized them suddenly, while they were unaware.

These verses begin a section, vv. 94–102, that serves as a commentary on and conclusion to the prophetic narratives of Noah, Hūd, Šāliḥ, Lot, and Shu‘ayb. In both general and specific ways, the Quran indicates that the sending of a prophetic messenger is often accompanied by some form of adversity for his people as a moral test. In v. 94, misfortune and hardship refer to poverty, hunger, illness, and various forms of loss (see 6:42–44c). In some cases, as mentioned in v. 95, the test consists of an alternation between hardship and ease, since God tries people with good and bad fortune (cf. v. 168) to engender both humility and gratitude. The good fortune that replaced their earlier adversity continued till they multiplied—that is, until they increased in both wealth and children (T), the two worldly goods that give people a false sense of “security” (cf. vv. 97–99) with regard to both the vicissitudes of this life and punishment in the next; see, for example, 34:34–35: And We sent no warner unto a town, but that those living in luxury therein said, “We disbelieve in that wherewith you have been sent.” And they say, “We are greater in wealth and children, and we shall not be punished.” In v. 95, some fail the test by attributing both adversity and ease to the normal course of earthly life (R, Z), rather than understanding them as a test or a gift from God. As a result, they become heedless and complacent, and thus are seized... suddenly by Divine punishment while in this state of ease and thus unaware. See commentary on the very similar passage in 6:42–44.
Had the people of the towns believed and been reverent, We would surely have opened unto them blessings from Heaven and earth. But they denied, so We seized them for that which they used to earn.

If, by contrast, the people of the towns had believed, God would have opened unto them blessings from Heaven and earth, which may refer to the opening of the heavens to send down rain, so that crops would grow abundantly on the earth (IK, R, Z), but could also refer metaphorically and by extension to God’s providing them with all manner of good things (Z), including security and peace (R), which can also be understood spiritually to mean security and peace for the soul.

Did the people of the towns feel secure from Our Might coming upon them by night, while they were sleeping?

Or did the people of the towns feel secure from Our Might coming upon them in broad daylight, while they were playing?

Did they feel secure from God’s plotting? None feels secure from God’s plotting, save the people who are losers.

The series of rhetorical questions in these verses emphasizes the foolishness of feeling “secure” in the life in the world or “secure” from God’s punishment, which may come in either this world or the next. This idea is found in other verses, such as 10:7–8: Truly those who anticipate not the meeting with Us, and who are content with the life of this world and feel secure therein, and who are heedless of Our signs, it is they whose refuge shall be the Fire for that which they used to earn; and 16:45: Do those who have plotted evil deeds feel secure that God will not cause the earth to engulf them, or that the punishment will not come upon them whence they are not aware? (cf. 12:107; 17:68–69; 67:16–17).
The questions posed in vv. 97–98 indicate that God’s punishment may descend by night, while people are asleep, and so unconscious and unaware, or in broad daylight, while they were playing, that is, distracted by their engagement with affairs of this world, which is itself described as mere play and diversion in several verses (6:32; 29:64; 47:36; 57:20). According to al-Rāzī, God will send down punishment upon such disbelievers when they are in the greatest state of heedlessness. God’s plotting is mentioned in several verses and refers to God’s ultimate control over the outcome of all events; it is frequently juxtaposed with the futility of human “plotting” by comparison (cf. 3:54; 10:21; 13:42; 14:46; 16:26; 27:50). Here, God’s plotting may refer specifically to His seizing them with punishment while they were unaware (v. 95; R, Z), that is, while they were sleeping or playing.

Does it not serve as guidance unto those who inherited the earth after its [earlier] inhabitants that, if We willed, We could smite them for their sins and set a seal upon their hearts such that they would not hear?

This verse indicates that the stories of past peoples and their destruction on account of their sins and their rejection of their messengers is meant as a warning for those who inherited the earth after them, that is, all later peoples who might be similarly destroyed for their sins. In the context of the Prophet’s life, however, this was perhaps directed specifically at the Quraysh (R), since, like the peoples of Noah, Hūd, Sālih, Lot, and Shu‘ayb before them, they rejected their prophet, Muhammad, and drove him from Makkah, his native city. The idea that God may set a seal upon people’s hearts so that they cannot hear or understand religious truth—a punishment particularly for wrongdoing or disbelief—is found in several verses throughout the Quran (see 2:7c; 4:155; 6:46; 9:87, 93; 10:74; 16:108; 30:59; 40:35; 42:24; 45:23; 47:16; 63:3).

These are the towns whose stories We have recounted unto thee. Their messengers certainly brought them clear proofs, but they would not believe in what they had denied earlier. Thus does God set a seal upon the hearts of the
disbelievers.

Cf. 11:100, where a nearly identical verse concludes a similar series of prophetic narratives of earthly destruction. The stories are recounted unto thee—that is, to the Prophet most specifically—so that he would be assured that God aids His prophets and the believers against their enemies in this world (T) as well as rewarding them in the next, and so that he might warn his own people, the Quraysh, of the fate that awaited them if they persisted in disbelief (R, T). Though all the messengers brought clear proofs of their prophethood and the Divine origin of their message, most of their people would not believe in what they had denied earlier. For some commentators, this last statement refers to the making of the pretemporal covenant with all Children of Adam, in which all human beings testified to the Lordship of God (v. 172). According to these commentators, their “earlier denial” was manifested even at the moment of the pretemporal covenant, in which they bore witness to God’s Lordship only reluctantly and insincerely (R, T); or their denial was manifest at this pretemporal event insofar as their ultimate moral status as believers or disbelievers was already known to God at that time (T). This statement may also be connected with other verses that indicate that if the disbelievers, after being brought to judgment in the Hereafter, were to be returned to earthly life to mend their ways, they would return to the very thing they had been forbidden (6:28); that is, they would return to the same pattern of disbelief and wrongdoing (R, T, T).

Others interpret they would not believe in what they had denied earlier as a reference to the stubborn and unrelenting disbelief of most of the people of those towns—and by extension, other peoples—for whom no amount of warning, preaching, or even evidentiary miracles could bring them to accept the messengers sent to them and to their persisting in their state of denial and disbelief until death (R, Z). Some have proposed that it was only because He was aware of the futility of future preaching for bringing these people to belief that God destroyed them (T). The statement might also be read transhistorically to mean that disbelievers of any generation will not believe in what those like them among previous peoples had denied earlier (T). That God has set a seal upon the hearts of the disbelievers indicates that some will never believe (R; see 2:7c; 4:155c).

We did not find most of them [faithful to their] pact. Indeed, We found most of them to be iniquitous.
We did not find most of them [faithful to their] pact is an idiomatic rendering of the Arabic, which literally reads, “We found no pact for most of them.” Although all major commentators understand this statement as rendered, al-Rāzī also notes that in being unfaithful to their pact with God, it is as if they had made no pact at all with God. Most of them may refer to most of those among the peoples of Noah, Hūd, Šāliḥ, Lot, and Shūṭayb—namely, the majority of them who rejected their messengers and the warnings they brought—but may also refer to most human beings in general (Z). Consistent with the latter reading, pact here may be understood as a reference to the pretemporal covenant that God makes with all of humanity, requiring them to bear witness to His Lordship, as recounted in v. 172 (R, Ṭ). That they were not “faithful to their pact” would thus mean that they did not continue to recognize God’s Lordship and His claim to their obedience and worship during the course of their earthly lives. Even without specific or explicit reference to the pretemporal covenant, most commentators understand the statement that most of them were not faithful to their pact to mean that most people fail to act upon the intrinsic knowledge and moral responsibility that God has given them regarding the necessity of worshipping only the One God and abandoning idolatry, being obedient to His messengers, being reverent, obeying His laws, being thankful for one’s blessings, and performing virtuous deeds while avoiding abominable ones (Ṭ, Ts, Z).

That God found most of them to be iniquitous may again refer to the destroyed peoples of the past, to all past generations, or to all humanity. If it is understood to refer to all humanity, it would be consistent with many other Quranic verses stating that most people are ungrateful (2:243; 10:60; 12:38; 27:63; 40:61), are unaware of spiritual truths (7:187; 12:21, 40, 68; 16:38, 75; 27:61; 30:6, 30; 34:28, 36; 39:29, 49; 40:57; 44:39; 45:26), and are not believers (11:17; 12:103–6; 13:1; 17:89; 26:8, 67, 103, 121, 139, 158, 174, 190; 40:59). In Sūrah 26, which contains a discussion of past prophets and their struggles with their peoples similar to that found in the present Sūrah, the statement that most of humanity does not believe functions as something of a refrain throughout that Sūrah.

Then after them We sent Moses with Our signs unto Pharaoh and his notables, but they treated them wrongfully; so behold how the workers of corruption fared in the end.

This verse begins a lengthy segment (vv. 103–56) concerning the prophet
Moses, who was sent after them, that is, after the previous prophets mentioned in vv. 59–93. Other narrative accounts of Moses’ life are found in 5:20–26; 10:75–93; 18:60–82; 20:9–97; 26:10–66; 27:7–14; 28:3–46; 40:23–45; 43:46–56; 79:15–25. As with the previous prophets mentioned in this sūrah, the opposition to Moses is led, in part, by the notables among the people to whom he was sent (cf. vv. 60, 75, 88–90). The notables, in particular, are guilty of having treated God’s signs wrongfully (cf. v. 10) by disbelieving in them (Ṭ, Z) or by turning others away from them (Z) as well as of being workers of corruption (see 7:56c). The command so behold is addressed to the Prophet, indicating that these prophetic narratives were meant to give him confidence that God aids His messengers against their enemies. Like the peoples of Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Lot, and Shu‘ayb, those who rejected Moses and his warnings met with utter destruction in the end.

And Moses said, “O Pharaoh! I am truly a messenger from the Lord of the worlds,

104 See 43:46 for an identical verse as well as vv. 61, 68, where Noah and Hūd similarly identify themselves as messengers from the Lord of the worlds—a title for God found throughout the Quran, beginning with the openingsūrah; see 1:2c. God also identifies Himself to Moses as the Lord of the worlds when the latter first encounters Him and receives his prophetic vocation (28:30).

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105 obligated to speak naught about God save the truth. I have brought you a clear proof from your Lord; so send forth with me the Children of Israel.”

105 According to one account, after Moses articulated his claim to be a messenger from the Lord of the worlds (v. 104), Pharaoh replied that he was lying. In the present verse, Moses can be understood as responding to that charge by indicating that he would speak naught about God save the truth (Th, Z). See also 7:169, where speaking truthfully about God is a condition of the Israelites’ covenant with God. Throughout the Quran, the prophets often claim that they are bringing a clear proof (or clear proofs) from God or that they stand upon a clear proof; in this sūrah similar claims are made by the prophet Ṣāliḥ in v. 73 and the prophet Shu‘ayb in v. 85. Clear proof (bayyinah) may refer to scriptural
revelations, prophetic warnings, or evidentiary miracles performed by the prophets (see, e.g., 2:87; 3:105; 4:153; 5:32; 6:157; 7:101; 9:70; 10:13; 14:9; 16:44; 19:73). In this case, the *clear proof* to which Moses refers is the miracles that he would subsequently perform (Ṭs) as well as the force of his call to Pharaoh to accept the message he brings and to send forth ... the Children of Israel (see also 20:47; 26:17; 44:18), that is, to free them from servitude and allow them to return to the Holy Land (Ṭs, Z).

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106  He said, “If you have brought a sign, then bring it forth, if you are among the truthful.”

107  So he cast his staff and, behold, it was a serpent manifest.

108  And he drew forth his hand and, behold, it was white to the onlookers.

106–8  Pharaoh asks Moses for *a sign*, that is, a proof of the truth of the message he brings (Ṭ) or a proof of God Himself (Ṭs). The two evidentiary miracles Moses produces in response—his thrown staff transforms into a serpent and his hand turns white (see also 26:32–33)—were acts in which he had been previously instructed by God (20:18–22; 27:10–12; 28:30–32). The serpent produced from his staff was said to be of supernaturally large size and to have frightened Pharaoh from his throne (Th, Ṭs).

According to a legendary account, the staff had been Adam’s staff and was bequeathed to successive prophets, including Shuṭayb, the father-in-law of Moses, until it reached Moses himself (Ṭs). When Moses speaks with God for the first time, God questions Moses about his staff (20:17–18), and Moses later uses the staff to miraculously produce twelve streams of water from a rock (2:60; 7:160) and to part the sea (26:63). Some commentators note that it was Pharaoh’s request for a second sign that prompted Moses to put his hand into the hollow or sleeve of his cloak and then to “draw it forth” as white as snow (Th, Ṭs).

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109  The notables among Pharaoh’s people said, “Truly this
is a knowledgeable sorcerer.

He desires to expel you from your land; so what do you command?”

109–10  The notables consider Moses a knowledgeable sorcerer (cf. 26:34, where it is Pharaoh who describes Moses as a knowledgeable sorcerer to his notables) and accuse him of seeking to expel Pharaoh from his land.

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They said, “Put him and his brother off for a while, and send marshalers to the cities

111–26  The reaction of the notables in vv. 109–10 sets up the competition between Moses and the sorcerers of Egypt, which is also recounted in 20:58–70 and 26:36–48 (cf. 10:79–82, where the sorcerers challenge Moses with their feats, but he does not respond in kind). The Bible provides a very short account of the competition with the Egyptian sorcerers, in which it is Aaron who casts the staff (Exodus 7:8–13). In the Quran, the story of Moses and the sorcerers provides a meditation on the relationship between prophethood, miracles, and sorcery and the differences between miracles and sorcery with regard to their causality, power, and reality. Moses is accused by Pharaoh and his people of sorcery elsewhere (10:76; 20:57, 63; 26:34; 27:13; 28:36; 40:24; 51:39), as are other prophets, including Muhammad and Jesus, by their own people (cf. 5:110; 10:2; 11:7; 34:43; 37:15; 38:4; 43:30; 46:7; 51:52; 54:2; 61:6; 74:24). Given that the miracles of the prophets are often dismissed as mere sorcery by their detractors and have no effect upon certain disbelievers, it seems that the primary function of these miracles is to encourage belief among those who are already inwardly disposed to it—like the sorcerers in this pericope—as well as those wavering between belief and disbelief. These miracles, like the prophetic messages themselves, serve to distinguish the inherently good, but merely misguided, members of a disbelieving community from those, like Pharaoh, whose hearts were so hardened as to be impervious to any prophetic sign or message. See also 43:49c.

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to bring you every knowledgeable sorcerer.”
The call for sorcerers to challenge Moses is also mentioned in 10:79 and 26:36–67. The notables’ suggestion that Pharaoh put him (Moses) and his brother off for a while is understood to be a suggestion that he detain them by either delaying their departure or imprisoning them (IK, Ṭ). According to one report, the marshaled sorcerers boast of their superior skill in the manipulation of staffs, ropes, and snakes (Ṭ), and other reports indicate that the marshalers sought out sorcerers capable of feats similar to those produced by Moses (IK).

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And the sorcerers came unto Pharaoh. They said, “We shall surely have a reward if it is we who are victorious.”

He said, “Yes, and indeed you shall be among those brought nigh.”

Cf. 26:41–42. The sorcerers seek a reward if they are victorious over Moses. Pharaoh replies that their reward will be that they shall be among those brought nigh, meaning that they will become honored members of his court or his inner circle (IK, Ṭ). Although these verses, on a literal level, articulate the worldly desire for reward on the part of the sorcerers and Pharaoh’s worldly manner of fulfilling it, the ambiguity of the language suggests that the sorcerers, and Pharaoh unwittingly, but presciently, utter truths that will come to be realized in a manner other than the one they envision. The sorcerers are defeated by Moses, but their subsequent submission to God and to Moses can be understood as a spiritual “victory,” for which they will surely have a reward with God. Although not mentioned in the well-known commentaries, it is noteworthy that Pharaoh’s promise that they shall be among those brought nigh (muqarrabūn) is identical to a description used elsewhere in the Quran for prophets, angels, and the most righteous who are rewarded with the highest Paradise (cf. 3:45c; 4:172; 56:10–11, 88; 83:21, 28). Vv. 124–26 suggest that the sorcerers were martyred for their belief and may therefore be among those brought nigh in the Hereafter.

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They said, “O Moses! either you cast, or we will be the ones who cast.”
He said, “Cast!” And when they cast, they bewitched the eyes of the people and struck them with awe, and they brought forth a mighty sorcery.

115–16 Cf. 20:65. Some commentators indicate that the sorcerers demonstrated proper etiquette by allowing Moses to choose who should cast the staff first (R, Z), even as they clearly preferred to cast first (Z). Some commentators propose that it is as a reward for their graciousness and proper demeanor toward Moses that God causes faith to enter their hearts, so that they ultimately come to be believers in God and in Moses’ prophethood (R). Moreover, this demonstration of outward etiquette, or *adab,* toward Moses may have been recounted here, because it suggests that the sorcerers possessed an inner sincerity that allowed them to perceive Moses as a person of noble character, deserving of respect. Moses responds graciously by letting them cast first, both because he understands their desire to do so and because he is certain that God will aid him and that no sorcery can defeat a miracle (*mu‘jizah;* R, Z), which has a Divine cause and is inimitable through mere human agency. Moreover, the sorcerers’ casting first allows Moses to demonstrate more easily the powerlessness of their deceptions in the face of the truth (IK, R), since the power of his own staff is then able to “devour all their deceptions” (v. 117).

The sorcerers produced tricks that *bewitched the eyes of the people* through slight of hand and illusion (Z); see also 20:69, where their feat is described as merely a *sorcerer’s trick.* The people were *struck with awe* by the sorcerers’ feats; cf. 20:67, where because of their display Moses conceived a *fear in his soul.* The sorcerers cast ropes and wooden staffs (see 26:44) that were painted so as to create the illusion of writhing snakes filling the ground, one upon another (IK, R, Z). Others report that the sorcerers had placed mercury inside the staffs and ropes so that they began to move in the hot sun (R, Ţs, Z), as the competition was held in the open desert at the hottest time of the day (see 20:58–59).

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And We revealed unto Moses, “Cast thy staff!” And, behold, it devoured all their deceptions.

117 Cf. 20:69; 26:45. Although Moses is expected to cast his staff to produce a great feat, he waits until God *revealed unto* him the direct instruction to cast it—a command heard only by Moses (R, Ţs)—indicating that the power and will behind this feat belong to God alone; cf. 3:49 and 5:110, where Jesus’ miracles are
explicitly performed by God’s Leave. Moses’ staff becomes a serpent, as it did before Pharaoh alone in v. 107, and this serpent is reported to have literally *devoured* the sorcerers’ deception, that is, to have swallowed up the staffs and ropes that had been made to look like writhing serpents (Ṭ). When Moses grasped the staff again, it returned to its previous form, as it did when God first instructed him in this miraculous sign *in the holy valley of Ṭuwā* (20:12).

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Thus the truth came to pass, and whatsoever they did was shown to be false.

118 That *the truth came to pass* means that it became plainly manifest and victorious over the sorcerers’ deceptions (Ṭ) and that Moses’ prophethood was validated (Ṭs). *Came to pass* translates *waqaʿa*, which can also mean to “fall” or “alight,” and some have suggested that here it means that the truth alighted upon the hearts of the sorcerers (Z), for in the following verses they submit themselves to God and Moses. *Whatsoever they did* refers to the deceptions of the sorcerers, which were *shown to be false*. The statement in this verse is similar to others that juxtapose truth and falsehood in order to demonstrate the invincibility of the truth. See, for example, 17:81: *Say, “Truth has come, and falsehood has vanished. Truly falsehood is ever vanishing”*; 21:18: *Nay, but We cast truth against falsehood, and it crushes it, and, behold, it vanishes*; and 42:24: *God wipes out falsehood and verifies the truth through His Words*. See also 10:81–82, where Moses states, after the sorcerers have cast their staffs, *That which you have produced is sorcery; God will soon bring it to naught.* . . . *God verifies the truth through His Words, though the guilty be averse.*

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Then and there they were vanquished and turned back, humbled.

And the sorcerers were cast down prostrate.

119–20 Cf. 20:70; 26:46–48. *They*—that is, both Pharaoh and the sorcerers—were *vanquished* by Moses’ feat, and Pharaoh reportedly released Moses from detention or imprisonment (Ṭs; see 7:111–12c). Because the sorcerers knew that
their own feats were mere deception, they recognized that the feat produced by Moses could only have been of Divine provenance (IK, Ṭs, Z). They *turned back*, meaning that they had an immediate change of heart, and were *humbled* and amazed before the awesome power displayed by Moses. *Were cast down prostrate* translates the same verb used in the preceding verses to denote the action of casting down the staffs, thus indicating the speed and force with which they prostrated themselves—as if they were literally “cast down,” involuntarily, by what they had observed (Ṭs, Z). The use of this same verb also sharpens the contrast between their earlier “casting” of the staffs for the purposes of deception and their now “being cast” into sincere submission to God. They made themselves *prostrate*, in a display of utter humility and submission to God (Ṭ).

According to al-Rāzī, the master sorcerers’ immediate realization of the Divine provenance of Moses’ feat and their subsequent submission to God and Moses is an indication of the spiritual value of knowledge, for it was the sorcerers’ advanced knowledge of their own art that allowed them to recognize that Moses’ actions were not sorcery at all. In other words, full knowledge even of worldly sciences should also engender an understanding of the limits and inadequacies of those sciences in relation to sciences based upon spiritual realities and higher principles, particularly when one is directly confronted with the latter. For this reason, the Islamic tradition argues that each messenger was sent with miracles that demonstrated an inimitable mastery of the leading arts and sciences of the people to whom they had been sent. Moses is thus sent with miracles that are similar to, but that utterly transcend, those of the sorcerers of his day, in a society where sorcery and the occult sciences seem to have been held in great esteem; Jesus was sent with healing miracles in an age when medical science enjoyed great prestige; and Muhammad was sent to the Arabs, whose major art form was poetry and eloquent speech, with a scripture whose literary and linguistic style was considered to be of unsurpassed beauty and power.

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They said, “We believe in the Lord of the worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron.”

121–22 The sorcerers profess belief in the Lord of the worlds, a common title for God found throughout the Quran (see 1:2c); it is invoked several times in this sūrah (see vv. 54, 61, 67, 104) and is common in the accounts of the pre-Islamic prophets. The sorcerers’ identification of the God they now recognize as the Lord of Moses and Aaron was, according to some, a means of making it clear that they were prostrating to the One God, and not to Pharaoh, who also considered himself a god (see 28:38). Al-Rāzī also suggests that the sorcerers invoked both Moses and Aaron here, because if they had only mentioned “the Lord of Moses,” Pharaoh might still think that they were prostrating to him, since Pharaoh had “raised” (rabba, from the same root as rabb, meaning “Lord”) Moses as a child (see 26:18; 28:7–9). Aaron, Moses’ brother, is also identified as a prophet in the Quran (19:53). As in the Biblical account, he is sent by God to accompany Moses to Egypt—at Moses’ request—to confront Pharaoh (10:75; 28:34–35; Exodus 4:10–16), and he also served as Moses’ close aide as he wandered through the desert with the Israelites (7:142; 20:25–36).

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Pharaoh said, “You believe in him before I grant you leave! This is surely a plot you have devised in the city, that you might expel its people therefrom. Soon you shall know.

123 Cf. 20:71. Pharaoh is outraged that the sorcerers would believe in him—that is, in Moses—before Pharaoh “grants them leave.” In contrast to the sorcerers, who immediately recognized that Moses’ power came from the One God, Pharaoh considered Moses’ feat no more than a sorcerer’s trick, albeit a superior one. He describes the entire competition, including Moses’ victory and the sorcerers’ submission, as a plot devised by Moses and the sorcerers together (IK, Ṭ, Th, Ṭs) to expel the people of Egypt from Egypt, so that the Israelites could settle there (Z). According to one report, before the competition began, Moses approached the head of the sorcerers to ask if they would believe in him and witness to the truth of his message if Moses were victorious, and the sorcerers agreed that they would. Pharaoh reportedly overheard the exchange, and when it
came to pass, he declared the whole affair to have been a prearranged plot (IK, Ṭ). See also 20:71, where Pharaoh accuses Moses of being the sorcerers’ secret master. Pharaoh then warns them, soon you shall know; that is, they will know the terrible punishment Pharaoh intends to impose on them (Th), as described in the following verse.

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124 I shall surely cut off your hands and your feet on alternate sides; then I shall surely crucify you all!”

The punishment here is similar to the punishment ordained for those who wage war against God and His Messenger and endeavor to work corruption upon the earth in 5:33. The commentators report that the first person to execute the punishment of “cutting off hands and feet on alternate sides” and crucifixion was Pharaoh (Q, Ṭs, Z), who crucified his victims on palm trees on the banks of the Nile (Ṭs); this latter detail is mentioned in Pharaoh’s threat as uttered in 20:71.

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125 They said, “Truly we turn unto our Lord.

126 You take vengeance upon us only because we believed in the signs of our Lord when they came unto us. Our Lord, shower us with patience, and let us die as submitters.”

125–26 The sorcerers respond to Pharaoh’s threat by affirming that they “turn unto” their Lord, indicating that they were not troubled by the threat of death, since they now looked only toward the meeting with God (Z) with love and longing (Bq) and with the hope that they would be rewarded for the pain they suffered under Pharaoh’s torments (Z). The sorcerers’ humble complaint to Pharaoh, You take vengeance upon us only because we believed in the signs of our Lord, is similar to the words of a secret believer in Pharaoh’s court who asks Pharaoh if he would kill a man for saying, “My Lord is God” (40:28); see also 5:59 and 85:9, which chastise those who would be vengeful toward others simply on account of their belief in God and His signs.

The signs of our Lord refers to the feats performed by Moses (R). The sorcerers’ subsequent supplication, shower us with patience (see 2:250, where the
same supplication is made by the Israelites facing the army of Goliath), is a request that God aid them in remaining steadfast in the face of torture and death at the hands of Pharaoh, lest they revert to disbelief under this extreme duress (Ṭ, Ṭs). According to some, the painful death suffered by the sorcerers purified them of their past sins (Z).

*Submitters* translates *muslimīn* (*muslims*), used here in the universal sense of those who submit themselves fully to the One God. Pharaoh reportedly had the sorcerers killed and crucified that very day, and several early commentators observed that the sorcerers “began the day as sorcerers and ended it as martyrs” (IK, Ṭ, Ṭs). Their request, *let us die as submitters*, can also be translated “take us to Thyself as submitters” and might therefore be understood as a plea for God to take them to Himself immediately so that they might be spared the punishment of Pharaoh (R). Cf. 20:72–73 and 26:50–51 for similar accounts of the sorcerers’ response to Pharaoh’s threats.

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The notables among Pharaoh’s people said, “Will you leave Moses and his people to work corruption in the land and to leave you and your gods?” He said, “We shall slay their sons and spare their women. Truly we are above them, dominant.”

127 Although Pharaoh killed the sorcerers, he allowed Moses to go free. Pharaoh’s *notables* thus express concern that he would leave Moses and his people, the Israelites, to live and to worship as they prefer, and to leave you (Pharaoh) and your gods, that is, to abandon the worship of Pharaoh and his gods for obedience to Moses and the worship of the One God (Ṭ). The commentators are unclear on the identity of Pharaoh’s *gods* mentioned in this verse; some say he worshipped the sun or certain sacred cattle, hence the Israelites’ inclination to make an idol in the form of a calf in v. 148 (Ṭ, Ṭs). Still others assert that Pharaoh was himself worshipped, but did not worship anything himself (Ṭ), or that the *gods* referred to here were idols that Pharaoh had made and that he had commanded people to worship as a way of worshipping him (Ṭs, Z). The question posed by the notables might also be rendered, “Will you leave Moses and his people to work corruption upon the earth, when they have left you and your gods?” (Ṭ). See also 40:26, where Pharaoh indicates that he will kill Moses himself, fearing that Moses will alter their religion or cause corruption to appear in the land by leading people away from the worship of Pharaoh.
Pharaoh's threat to all those who followed Moses that he would *slay their sons*—that is, their young sons—and *spare their women* is consistent with his means of collective punishment mentioned elsewhere (see v. 141; 2:49; 14:6; 28:4; 40:25). Although Pharaoh did not harm Moses, out of fear of his great power, he reportedly carried out his threat upon his Israelite followers, hoping to weaken Moses indirectly by terrifying his supporters (R). Dominant translates qāhirūn, a plural form of qāhir, which is a Name or Attribute of God in the Quran; see 6:18, *He is Dominant over His servants*. That Pharaoh speaks of himself in terms used elsewhere in the Quran for God alone suggests Pharaoh's claim of divinity and lordship for himself (see 26:29; 28:38; 79:24; 7:123c).

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128 Moses said unto his people, “Seek help from God and be patient. Truly the land belongs to God; He bequeaths it to whomsoever He will among His servants. And the end belongs to the reverent.”

When his people are facing the terrible punishment of Pharaoh, described in v. 127, Moses advises them to *seek help from God* (see 1:5c) and to have patience in the same manner that the Quran enjoins believers to *seek help in patience and prayer* as a general spiritual attitude (see 2:45, 153), for *God is with the patient* (8:46). Moses encourages his people by reminding them that *the land*, meaning Pharaoh’s domain (R), *belongs to God* and that He may cause others to inherit it after him; and indeed in v. 137 God bequeaths the *eastern and western parts of the land that We blessed* to the Israelites (cf. 28:5–6) as a reward for their patience. Moses further promises that *the end belongs to the reverent* (a general promise also made in 11:49 and 28:83). The *end* may refer to the reward of the reverent in the Hereafter, to the later worldly success of the Israelites in vanquishing their enemies (v. 129) and settling in the land, or both (R).

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129 They said, “We were persecuted before you came to us, and after you came to us.” He said, “It may be that your Lord will destroy your enemies and make you vicegerents upon the earth, that He may observe how you behave.”
The Israelites respond that they were persecuted before Moses came to them—since the Quran elsewhere indicates that the punishment of slaying sons was inflicted by Pharaoh upon the Israelites at the time of Moses’ infancy (28:4–9)—and that they are now being persecuted in the same way again. Moses’ display of power had raised the Israelites’ hopes of being delivered from Pharaoh’s oppression; but when they heard Pharaoh announce the same brutal collective punishment he had inflicted on them earlier, they became despondent (R). Moses, seeking to strengthen their resolve (IK), reminded them that God may yet destroy their enemies and make them vicegerents upon the earth after Pharaoh and his people. The successive vicegerency of different peoples is a recurring idea in this sūrah; see 6:165c; 7:69c. If God grants them victory, it will be so that He may observe how they behave, that is, whether or not the people continue to worship the One God and obey His commands (R).

And We indeed afflicted the House of Pharaoh with drought and a shortage of crops, that haply they would be reminded.

Cf. v. 133, where other plagues sent against Pharaoh and his people are mentioned. That drought and a shortage of crops were visited upon the people of Pharaoh during the time of Moses’ mission to them is consistent with other verses indicating that the adversity suffered by a people in connection with the coming of a prophet is meant to make them humble and to cause them to hearken to God’s message. See, for example, 6:42: We have indeed sent messengers unto communities before thee, and We seized them with misfortune and hardship, that they might humble themselves (see also v. 94). That haply they would be reminded indicates that the famine and drought were meant to be an admonition to Pharaoh and his people and to frighten them, so that they would repent and believe in God (T). Adversity in general may also have the effect of “softening the heart” (R, Ṭs), although not in the case of Pharaoh, whose heart, according to the Biblical account, was increasingly hardened by the successive plagues (see Exodus 9–11), and here too he remains unrepentant (see 7:133c). Some commentators see this verse as proof that God does not compel people toward belief or disbelief, but rather arranges matters so as to encourage belief, but then allows people to choose how they will react (Ṭs); others cast doubt on this interpretation, noting that these apparent trials only further entrenched Pharaoh in disbelief (R).
But whenever good came to them, they would say, “This is ours.” And if an evil befell them, they would consider it an ill omen on account of Moses and those who were with him. Nay, their ill omen lies with God, though most of them know not.

131 Pharaoh and his supporters would consider any good fortune they enjoyed to be something they deserved, rather than a blessing for which they should be grateful (Ṭ, Z). Yet, they considered any evil that befell them, such as drought and famine (v. 130), to be an ill omen on account of Moses and his followers, meaning that their presence had brought these difficulties upon them. In 27:47, the Thamūd similarly considered Šāliḥ to be an “ill omen” for them; see also 4:78–79 and commentary, where certain Jews or hypocrites in Madinah considered any good that befell the city to be from God, but any evil to be on account of the presence of the Prophet. In the latter case, the Quranic response is that all good is from God, and all evil is from oneself. In the present verse, the response is that their ill omen lies with God, meaning that all good or bad fortune happens according to God’s Will and Wisdom (Ṭ, Z).

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And they said, “Whatever sign you may bring to bewitch us thereby, we will not believe in you.”

132 This verse encapsulates one of the key ideas presented in this account as a whole, namely, that no miraculous sign, no matter how powerful or convincing, can change the hearts of those who stubbornly refuse to believe. In v. 146, this stubbornness is engendered by pride, since God “turns away from His signs” those who, like Pharaoh and his notables, wax arrogant upon the earth. For the idea that some are impervious to all signs of God, see 6:25; 10:96–97.

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So We sent against them the flood and the locusts, and the lice and the frogs and the blood—signs expounded. But they waxed arrogant, and they were a guilty people.
This verse lists five punishments sent against Pharaoh and his people in response to their failure to believe in the One God and in Moses’ prophethood and to their continued oppression of the Israelites. Four of these five—the locusts, lice, frogs, and blood—are identical to four of the ten plagues visited upon Pharaoh’s people in the Biblical account (see Exodus 9–11). In 17:101, the Quran states that Moses was given nine clear signs, although these nine are understood as including the miracles of his staff and his hand, not just the punishments visited upon Pharaoh; see 17:101c. Flood here translates ṭūfān (related to the word “typhoon”), the word also used to describe the flood of Noah (29:14), which usually connotes a complete deluge that brings sudden and rapid death. Some commentators, however, interpret it to mean death that comes from all sides or by all means, since it derives from a root meaning “to surround,” a view supported by a ḥadīth in which the Prophet glossed ṭūfān simply as “death” (IK, T). According to one report, the rain persisted for eight days and flooded the houses of the Egyptians, but did not enter those of the Israelites (Z).

Lice translates qummal, which may denote a variety of tiny insects, including fleas or ticks (T). According to some, the locusts consumed most of the crops in the fields, and when this did not cause Pharaoh to repent, the qummal consumed the rest of the crops (T, Z). Pharaoh’s continued stubbornness led to subsequent punishments in the form of the frogs, which filled the houses of the Egyptians and ruined them (T), and the blood, which was what any water drawn by the Egyptians turned into, while water drawn from the same sources by Israelites was clean (T, Z). This is similar to the description of the plague of blood as described in the Biblical account (see Exodus 9). According to one report, each punishment lasted a week, and when it was lifted on account of Pharaoh’s plea and Moses’ supplication to God, Pharaoh’s state of repentance lasted only a month, after which he resumed his disbelieving and oppressive ways (T, Z). The verse describes these punishments as signs expounded (āyāt mufaṣṣalāt), which some interpret to mean signs that any reasonable person would know came from God (Z), and others interpret to mean successive signs, that is, distinct from one another in time (T, Z). That Pharaoh and his people continued to “wax arrogant” in the face of these signs proved that they were truly a guilty people, stubborn and incorrigible in their sinful behavior.

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And when the torment came down upon them, they said, “O Moses! Call upon your Lord for us by the covenant He has made with you. If you lift this torment from us, we
shall surely believe in you, and we shall surely send forth the Children of Israel with you.”

135 But when We lifted the torment from them, for a term they were to fulfill, behold, they reneged.

134–35 Cf. 43:49–50. Torment here translates rijz, which can mean filth and defilement as well as Divine punishment (see 7:71c; 29:34). According to some commentators, the torment here refers to a sudden illness that took the lives of seventy thousand Egyptians in a single night, while sparing the Israelites who had marked their doors with sheep’s blood (Ṭ, Ṭs). These details suggest that this refers to the same event as the plague that, according to the Bible, struck the firstborn among the Egyptians, as recounted in Exodus 11–12. Commentators also note, however, that the torment here may be a collective reference to the various punishments inflicted upon Pharaoh’s people in v. 133 (IK, R, Ṭ), and that the present verses describe the reaction of Pharaoh and his associates to each one—namely, their imploring Moses to ask God to lift the punishment in return for becoming believers and freeing the Israelites, and then reneging shortly thereafter. For other examples of the human tendency to call upon God in moments of peril and to make promises of worship and belief that are soon broken when the peril has passed, see 6:63–64; 10:22–23; 29:65; 30:33; 31:32.

Pharaoh and his notables beseech Moses, call upon your Lord by the covenant He has made with you, referring to the special relationship they understand Moses to have had with God, given his ability to perform miraculous signs (Ṭs, Z). V. 135 confirms that God responded by lifting the punishment, but only for a term they were to fulfill. This term is said by some to refer to a period of respite before they would be destroyed completely (R). That they reneged refers to their obstinate refusal to recognize Moses’ prophethood or release the Israelites, as they had promised in v. 134.

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136 So We took vengeance upon them and drowned them in the sea for their having denied Our signs and for having been heedless of them.

136 That God took vengeance upon them means that He punished them for their evil deeds and because they were heedless of the signs and clear proofs of
Moses’ prophethood (Ṭs). The Quran, like the Bible, recounts that Pharaoh and his hosts were drowned in the sea, which Moses had miraculously parted to allow the Israelites to pass through unharmed. When Pharaoh and his men attempted to pursue them through the parted waters, the sea returned to its normal state and drowned them; see 2:50; 8:54; 10:90; 17:103; 26:65–66; 28:40; 43:55; 44:24; 51:40. Sea here translates *yamm*, which is similar to the Hebrew word used in the Biblical reference to the sea that Moses parted (Exodus 14–15). This word, rather than the more common Arabic word for sea, *bahr*, is used in the Quran only in connection with the Mosaic narratives (in 20:39, 78, 97; 28:7, 40; 51:40). *Yamm* may also refer to a sea of unfathomable depths (Z) or, alternately, to the loud roar of the sea or to its vastness (Z).

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And We bequeathed unto the people who were oppressed the eastern and western parts of the land that We blessed. And the most beautiful Word of thy Lord was fulfilled for the Children of Israel because they were patient. And We demolished all that Pharaoh and his people had wrought and that which they used to build.

This verse seems to be a fulfillment of Moses’ words in v. 128. God bequeaths the land to those who were oppressed (mustad‘afūn)—that is, the Israelites—as a reward because they were patient under Pharaoh’s oppression (v. 127). The verse can also be taken in a more general sense to indicate that those who face adversity with patience and the anticipation of Divine Succor will be granted deliverance. The land that We blessed is thought by many to refer to the area encompassing Syria and Palestine (Shām in Arabic; Ṭ, Ṭs), since this is the land understood elsewhere in the Quran as being ordained for the Israelites (5:21), but not necessarily only the Israelites, since it is holy and blessed for all peoples (21:71); others claim that the land here refers to the domain of Pharaoh in Egypt (R, Ṭ, Ṭs) or to both Egypt and Syria/Palestine (R, Ṭs, Z). The land is called blessed because it has been endowed with fertility and abundance (Ṭs, Z). The most beautiful Word that was fulfilled for the Children of Israel refers to the triumph of the Israelites over Pharaoh (Ṭ) and is also considered to be the fulfillment of God’s Promise in 28:5–6: Yet We desired to be gracious to those who were oppressed in the land, and to make them imāms, and to make them the heirs, and to establish them in the land, and to show Pharaoh and Hāmān and
their hosts that which they dreaded from them. The destruction of all that Pharaoh and his people had wrought or built is a reference to the destruction of their palaces, gardens, fields, and orchards (Ṭ, Ṭs, Z).

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138 And We brought the Children of Israel across the sea, and they came upon a people clinging to their idols. They said, “O Moses! Make for us a god as they have gods.” He said, “Truly you are an ignorant people!

139 As for these, what they practice shall perish, and vain is that which they used to do.”

138–39 The Children of Israel were brought across the sea when Moses miraculously parted it with his staff, by Divine command (see 2:50; 20:77; 26:63; and the Biblical account in Exodus 14). Shortly thereafter—according to some, even before their feet were dry from their walk across the divided sea (Z)—they came upon a people clinging to idols. Commentators speculate that these may have been the Canaanites (Ṭ) or Lakhmites who had settled in the area (Ṭ, Ṭs) or descendants of Abraham’s idolatrous people (JJ). Their idols were said to be in the form of a calf (Ṭ, Z), which is also the form of the idol later made by the Israelites (see v. 148). In response, Moses derides them as an ignorant people (qawm tajhalūn); the word for ignorant being derived from the same root as jāhiliyyah, the pre-Islamic pagan era in Arabia. In both cases, ignorance refers to ignorance of the Greatness of God, of the duty to worship Him, and of the prohibition against worshipping anything else (Ṭ). As for these refers to the idolaters whom the Israelites have come upon, whose practices shall perish. That which they used to do is described as vain, since it neither brings them any benefit nor deflects from them any harm (R). This desire for an idol foreshadows the Israelites making and worshipping the calf in v. 148.

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140 He said, “Shall I seek for you a god other than God, when He has favored you above the worlds?”
And when We saved you from the House of Pharaoh, who inflicted terrible punishment upon you, slaying your sons and sparing your women. And in this was a great trial from your Lord.

140–41  Cf. 14:6; 20:80. That God has favored the Israelites above the worlds may mean that He favored them above all other people of their time or that the miraculous signs and deliverance (invoked in v. 141) that He granted them through Moses were not granted to any other people (R); see 2:47c. For the punishment of slaying your sons and sparing your women, see 7:127c.

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And We appointed for Moses thirty nights, and We completed them with ten [more]; thus was completed the appointed term of his Lord: forty nights. And Moses said unto his brother, Aaron, “Take my place among my people, set matters aright, and follow not the way of those who work corruption.”

142  Moses spent forty nights on Mt. Sinai, the sacred mountain referred to in 95:2 and elsewhere simply called “the Mount” (see 2:63, 93; 4:154); see also 2:51; Exodus 24:18. This event is widely reported to have taken place during a period that corresponds in the Islamic calendar to the month of Dhu’l-Qa’dah and the first ten days of Dhu’l-Ḥijjah (Mw, Ṭ, Z)—the last two months of the Arab calendar, which were considered sacred since the pre-Islamic era—and concluded on the day of the Islamic Feast of Sacrifice (‘Īd al-‘adḥā; Ṭ). During this time Moses reportedly fasted and engaged in intimate discourse with God (Mw, R, Ṭs, Z). Some report that he fasted for the first thirty days and that the Torah was revealed to him during the final ten days (R, Ṭū). According to some, Moses originally indicated that he would be on the mountain for thirty days, but God had him stay an additional ten, so as to test the faith of the Israelites when Moses did not return after the thirty days (Qm). Moses asks his brother Aaron to “take his place” temporarily as leader of his people, while he is gone. Take my place translates ukhlufnī, which is related to khalīfah, meaning “representative” or “successor,” a term that is used for the leaders of the Muslim community after the death of the Prophet. Aaron is instructed to set matters aright, that is, to encourage the
Israelites to worship God and obey Him (Ṭ) or to correct the corrupt among them while Moses was away (Ṭs).

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And when Moses came to Our appointed meeting and his Lord spoke unto him, he said, “My Lord, show me, that I might look upon Thee.” He said, “Thou shalt not see Me: but look upon the mountain: if it remains firm in its place, then thou wilt see Me.” And when his Lord manifested Himself to the mountain, He made it crumble to dust, and Moses fell down in a swoon. And when he recovered, he said, “Glory be to Thee! I turn unto Thee in repentance, and I am the first of the believers.”

This verse speaks directly to the issue of the human ability or inability to “see” God and seems to support the view that God cannot be seen by human beings, at least in the ordinary sense of seeing, in this world. It is consistent with the statement in 6:103: *Sight comprehends Him not, but He comprehends all sight.* Moses’ desire to see God is engendered by the state of intimacy he experienced with Him upon the mountain. There *his Lord spoke unto him* without intermediary (Ṭs, Z); and, according to a legendary report, God was so close that Moses could hear the scratching of the pen across the tablets as they were being written upon by God (Ṭ). With this closeness and the sweetness of God’s speaking to him (Su), Moses was overcome with spiritual ecstasy (Qu), yearned to be yet nearer to God, and was emboldened to ask, *My Lord, show me, that I might look upon Thee* (Ṭ). Some argued that Moses, who surely knew that God transcended all form and corporeality and thus could not be seen physically, asks this only to satisfy the Israelites, who in 2:55 declare, *O Moses, we will not believe thee till we see God openly* (Ṭs, Z). Still others suggest that Moses was not asking for a physical vision, but rather for such complete spiritual knowledge (*ma‘rīfah*) of God that it would be as if he were able to see Him directly (Ṭs, Z).

The verb *show me* might also be translated “cause me to see”—that is, “grant me the ability to see”—so that Moses might *look upon* God and attain the vision he desires. Some commentators understand God’s response, *Thou shalt not see Me*, to mean that God is not seen in this world, but may be in the next (IK, Ṭ), sometimes invoking 75:23, which speaks of the righteous *gazing upon their Lord* in the...
Hereafter; and Sufi writers speak of the ability to see God inwardly, with the eye of the heart. Others, however, argue that the response *Thou shalt not see Me* is stated in an emphatic form, indicating that God will not be seen, even in the next world (Ṭs, Z). In the Biblical account, Moses is told that none can see the Face of God “and live” (Exodus 33:20), and some commentators mention this as well (IK, T) or note that, had Moses not looked at the mountain when God manifested Himself, he would have died (Su). According to one report, Moses responded that he would rather see God and die than live without seeing Him (T). For Sufis, this may be connected with the idea that the vision of God in this life is only possible after the “death of the ego,” when one has completely “died” to the passions and desires of the soul. The annihilating power of God’s Self-Manifestation is similarly suggested in the saying attributed to the Prophet, “His veil is light. Were He to remove it, the Glory of His Face would burn up everything His Sight reached” (Su).

That the mountain crumbles after God says of it, *if it remains firm in its place, then thou wilt see Me*, indicates that seeing God with the physical eye is as impossible as the mountain being able to withstand God’s Self-Manifestation (Z); it demonstrates the annihilating power of that vision, since even the mountain, so much larger and stronger than Moses himself, was incapable of bearing it (IK). *He made it crumble to dust* might also be translated “He leveled it to the ground.” Elsewhere, mountains are awed or moved by the Power of God; see, for example, 33:72, where the mountains fear accepting the Trust of God, and 19:90–91, where it is said that the earth would be rent asunder and the mountains destroyed by the claim that God has a son.

Moses fell down in a swoon (Z) or as the result of being passed over by one of the angels (T, Z). *In a swoon* translates ʂaʿiqa, which might also be translated “thunderstruck,” from the same root as the thunderbolt (ʂāʿiqah) that is said to have struck the Israelites for asking a similar question in 2:55. Some indicate that Moses actually died in this moment and was brought back to life (Qm, T, Z), although others argue that recovered (afāqa) connotes arousal from a state of unconsciousness, rather than from physical death. Upon recovering, Moses “turns in repentance,” repenting of having asked to see God (T, Ts, Z). Moses’ assertion that he is the first of believers may mean that he was the first among the Israelites of his time to believe (T), that he was the first to believe that God could not be seen physically (IK, Qm, Ts, Z), or that he was the foremost believer of his time.

The Sufi tradition speaks of those who seek, and sometimes receive, the blessing of “seeing,” or “witnessing” God, or receiving an inward vision of God. Al-Sulamī, commenting on this verse, indicates that “nothing can withstand the witnessing of God save the hearts of the gnostics,” which God has adorned with spiritual knowledge of Himself and illuminated with His Light. Even so, al-Sulamī indicates that this “witnessing” really describes God’s witnessing or seeing Himself, “for the Real is witnessed by none but Himself.”
He said, “O Moses! Verily I have chosen thee above mankind through My messages and My speaking [unto thee]. So take that which I have given thee, and be among the thankful.”

According to some commentators, this verse recounts the consolation that was given to Moses after he was denied the vision of God (v. 143) and indicates the great blessing he had been given, for which he should be among the thankful (Qu, R). That Moses was chosen . . . above mankind indicates his status among the people of his time (Z); see also 20:13, where Moses is again called chosen, and 3:42, where Mary, the mother of Jesus, is described as chosen . . . above the women of the worlds. The Prophet Muhammad also has the name al-Muṣṭafā (the “Chosen One”), from the same root as the verb in I have chosen thee (iṣṭafaytuka). Moses is distinguished by the messages he received from God, meaning the Torah (Z), and by God’s having spoken directly to him; see also 4:164. In Exodus 33:11; Deuteronomy 5:4; 34:10, Moses is similarly distinguished by having spoken to God “face-to-face.” Because of this distinction, Moses is given the honorific title in the Islamic tradition of Kalīm Allāh, “he with whom God spoke.” The Prophet Muhammad is also said to have spoken to God without intermediary at the lote tree of the boundary (53:14; Ṭs) during his Night Journey and Ascension (miʿrāj); see 53:14–15c.

God wrote the Torah upon the Tablets, indicating that it was originally a written revelation; see also Exodus 31:18, where the Tablets were “written with the Finger of God.” Commentators generally consider there to have been two Tablets, as in the Biblical narrative, although the fact that Tablets is grammatically plural rather than dual has led to speculation that there could have been more than
two, some saying seven or ten (Z). Various reports indicate that the Tablets were made of emerald, ruby, or wood and that they were brought to Moses by the Archangel Gabriel (Th, Ṭs, Z); others say they were made of “stone” cut by Moses himself (Ṭs, Z), which is similar to the Biblical account in Exodus 34.

The Tablets contained an elaboration of all things, meaning that they contained all that the people needed to know for the purposes of their religion (Ṭ, Z) or that, like the Quran, they were revealed as a clarification of all things (16:89). Moses is commanded to take hold of them with strength; that is, to obey in earnest the commands and prohibitions given in them (Ṭ). Although Moses himself is instructed to take hold of them with strength, without qualification, the Israelites are told to hold to the best of them, which might also be translated “hold to the most beautiful of them.” This may mean simply that they should perform the good and virtuous actions commanded them in the Torah (Ṭ, Ṭs) or that they should try to inculcate the virtues—such as temperance, modesty, and patience—enjoined in it (Z). In 39:55, the Prophet is similarly instructed to enjoin his people to follow the most beautiful of that which has been sent down unto you from your Lord. The abode of the iniquitous may refer to the place of the sinful in the Hereafter (Ṭ, Z), to the land of Canaan (Ṭ), or to the land of Pharaoh (Z).

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I shall turn away from My signs those who wax arrogant upon the earth without right. Even if they were to see every sign, they would not believe in them. And if they were to see the way of sound judgment, they would not take it as a way, but if they were to see the way of error, they would take it as a way. That is because they denied Our signs and were heedless of them.

146 That God will turn away from His signs those who wax arrogant may mean that He will prevent them from understanding the revelation given to them (Ṭ, Z), perhaps by “sealing their hearts” so that they do not understand (Z; see, e.g., 9:87; 40:35) or by allowing them to be distracted by their worldly desires (Z). “Signs” here may indicate all of God’s signs and proofs, including both those present in nature and those found in the human soul (see 41:53c), in addition to scriptural revelation; that God “turns them away” from His signs thus means that He prevents them from contemplating them or benefitting from them (Ṭ, Z), since some signs benefit only those whose hearts are already in a state of belief (R).
Those Muslims who subscribed to the Ash'arite school of theology appealed to this verse to support their view that God might prevent certain people from believing, but Mu'tazilites and others interpreted God’s turning people from His signs as a punishment for their having freely chosen to wax arrogant and “deny” the signs of God beforehand (R, Ṭ). Wax arrogant translates yatakabbarūn, which means, literally, to make oneself out to be grand and, by implication, to belittle others. God is the Proud (Mutakabbir, from the same root, in 59:23), but all others wax arrogant . . . without right, since God alone has the right to assert His Greatness and Superiority over all beings (Z); thus Proud is positive when applied to God, but often negative when applied to human beings or other creatures. Alternately, waxing arrogant without right might refer to asserting one’s superiority over others when it is not merited (Z); see, for example, 7:12–13, where Iblis’s assertion of his superiority over Adam is dismissed as “waxing arrogant.” The way of sound judgment means the path of guidance, truth, and correct knowledge and action, leading to felicity in this world and in the Hereafter (R, Z).

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As for those who deny Our signs and the meeting of the Hereafter, their deeds have come to naught. Are they recompensed for aught save that which they used to do?

147 The meeting of the Hereafter refers to the Day of Resurrection and Judgment. Those who deny this key element of belief and the signs of God will have their deeds come to naught; that is, they will not benefit from them or receive reward for them, nor will their deeds, however seemingly good, be able to shield them from punishment for their denial and disbelief. Elsewhere it is said that disbelievers, idolaters, hypocrites, and those who persecute the prophets and the righteous will have their deeds come to naught (see, e.g., 2:217; 3:22; 5:5, 53; 9:17; 18:105). Rhetorical questions similar to Are they recompensed for aught save that which they used to do? are also posed in 10:52 and 27:90.

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And while he was away, the people of Moses took a calf [made] from their ornaments—a body that lowed. Did they not consider that it spoke not unto them, nor guided them
to any way? They took it up, and they were wrongdoers.

Cf. 2:51–54, 92–93; and especially 20:86–97, for the most extensive account in the Quran of the Israelites making and worshipping the calf. The Biblical account of this event is found in Exodus 32. While he was away—that is, while Moses was still speaking with God on the mountain—the Israelites took a calf [made] from their ornaments, meaning that they fashioned from precious metals, usually understood to be gold, an idol in the form of a calf and made it an object of worship, saying, This is our god and the god of Moses (20:88). Although Aaron was left in charge, commentators indicate that Aaron did not participate in making or worshipping the calf, which was directed by another Israelite referred to as al-Sāmirī (the “Samaritan”), as indicated in 20:87, 95–97. Rather, Aaron tried to stop this action (see 20:90).

The calf is described as a body that lowed—that is, emitted the sound of a live calf—leading some to think that it possessed a supernatural power, although 20:95–96 indicates that the lowing sound was the result of a kind of sorcery on the part of “the Samaritan” (al-Sāmirī). Others suggest that the calf was fashioned with carefully placed holes and hollows, and when the wind blew through them, it generated a lowing sound (R). Despite the lowing sound, the calf spoke not unto them, nor guided them to any way.

The Quranic narrative of this event offers a further reflection on the nature of prophetic guidance and miracles as contrasted with sorcery, indicating that unusual feats are not themselves indications of spiritual power or worthy of worship and are no substitute for Divine revelation. True prophethood and its signs can be distinguished from the mere conjuring of a sorcerer, because the former bring guidance and clarity, while the latter, like the feats of the sorcerers in v. 116, are ultimately powerless and illusory. They were wrongdoers, in that they “wronged themselves” by taking a powerless idol as an object of worship (R, Ṭ). Sufi commentators understand the calf and the Israelites’ willingness to worship it, despite God’s tremendous favor toward them, to be indicative of a tendency in human beings to allow worldly phenomena to distract them from the worship of God. It is a reminder that none are free of this temptation toward idolatry save those who have “slain their souls” (ST) by conquering its worldly passions.

And when they wrung their hands and saw that they had gone astray, they said, “If our Lord does not have mercy upon us and forgive us, we shall surely be among the ***
losers!"

149  *Wrung their hands,* in remorse, might be literally translated “[remorse] fell into their hands,” that is, settled into their hearts (R). Some suggest the image is an allusion to the tendency of the remorseful to bite their hands, as if they were attacking the site of their remorse (R, Z). Alternately, that remorse “fell into their hands” may mean that they now realized it was their responsibility to make amends and set matters right with their own “hands” (R). The Israelites’ statement is one of immediate and utter contrition, casting themselves upon the Mercy of God, rather than offering excuses. It is identical to what is uttered by Adam and Eve in v. 23, and by Noah in 11:47.

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150  And when Moses returned unto his people angry and aggrieved, he said, “How evil is the course you have followed after me! Would you hasten the Command of your Lord?” And he cast down the Tablets and seized his brother by the head, dragging him toward himself. He said, “Son of my mother! Truly the people deemed me weak, and they were about to kill me. So let not the enemies rejoice in my misfortune, and place me not with the wrongdoing people.”

150  Cf. 20:86. Moses returned to his people already *angry and aggrieved,* even before seeing them, because God made him aware of their having gone astray while he was still on the mountain (see 20:83–85; 20:83–84c). *Aggrieved* translates *asifān,* which may connote sadness, but also intense anger (Mw, T, Z). His anger was at his people, but also perhaps at himself for having left them (Mw, Su), while his grief was both for his people’s grave error and for his having to leave the intimate discourse with God (Mw, Su), since the narrative of this event in 20:83–85 suggests that Moses had to cut short his time on the mountain to address the matter. *How evil is the course you have followed after me* may have been directed at the Israelites generally or at the leaders among them, including Aaron (Z); *after me* may mean while Moses was away (IK, T, Ts) or after Moses had set the example of true monotheism (R, Z). *Would you hasten the Command of your Lord* may pertain to the command that they wait for Moses’ return. It thus addresses
their impatience concerning—and their ultimate hastening of—Moses’ return from his appointed meeting with God (IK, Ṭ, Ṭs, Z). See 7:142c, which mentions that Moses’ forty-day stay upon the mountain was reportedly ten days longer than his people had expected. It may also refer to their hastening God’s judgment upon them through their actions (R), a repeated Qur’anic warning to disbelievers (see, e.g., 6:57–58; 10:50–51). More broadly, the question might also be meant to chastise them for their impatience regarding God’s fulfillment of His Promise to them; see 20:86, where Moses asks in the same context: Did your Lord not make you a goodly promise? Did the pact seem too long for you?

Moses throws down the Tablets in anger (Ṭ) and shock (Z) upon seeing his people’s idolatrous worship, breaking them (R, Ṭ, Z), as in the Biblical account (Exodus 32:19). He then seizes his brother, Aaron, in anger for his having failed in his charge of preserving the Israelites in righteousness (see 7:142c). For another narrative of Moses’ confrontation with Aaron, see 20:92–94. Aaron pleads with Moses, calling him son of my mother, rather than just “my brother,” in a bid to evoke Moses’ tenderness and mercy toward him (IK, Ṭ, Z). He excuses his own actions by arguing that the people deemed him weak, meaning that they no longer recognized his authority (R, Ṭ)—as suggested by their having followed instead the directives of al-Sāmirī, while ignoring Aaron’s pleas for them to desist (20:90)—and were moreover prepared to slay him; see also 20:94, where Aaron argues that he feared he would be blamed for causing discord among the Israelites, had he been more forceful with them. Aaron further asks Moses not to let their enemies rejoice in his misfortune—that is, to gloat over his further humiliation at the hands of Moses—and not to place him with the wrongdoing people, that is, not to consider him guilty of idolatry and so punish him along with the others (Ṭ, Z).

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He said, “My Lord, forgive me and my brother and bring us into Thy Mercy, for Thou art the most Merciful of the merciful.”

151 Moses’ request for forgiveness for himself and his brother is considered by the commentators to be an indication of their complete dedication to God and their desire to draw near to Him, rather than an acknowledgment of sin or wrongdoing on their part (Ṭs), since the prophets are believed to be immune from sin according to the Islamic doctrine of the ḍiṣmah, or “inerrancy,” of the prophets. Others suggest that Moses asked God to forgive him for his anger and to forgive Aaron for not being forceful enough with the Israelites (R)—neither of which may be understood as rising to the level of “serious sin.” Moses’ anger is also said by...
some to have been not a personal anger, but a “holy anger” for God’s sake, motivated by his intense desire to preserve worship for God alone. It was not an anger that reflected lack of control of the passions, but was rather an anger manifested outwardly, in the form of holy wrath for the sake of religion, while Moses’ inner state remained characterized by calm and mercy (Aj).

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As for those who took up the calf, anger from their Lord shall seize them, and abasement in the life of this world. Thus do We recompense those who fabricate.

152 That Anger from their Lord shall seize the Israelites who worshipped the calf is thought by some to be a reference to the command that they atone for their sins by “slaying their own” in 2:54 (T, Z), which some commentators understand to mean that the Israelites were to slay those among their own people who were most guilty for the calf incident, and others understand as a form of collective punishment; see 2:54c. Some commentators understand both God’s anger and the Israelites’ abasement in the life of this world (see also 2:61) as references to later hardships that were to be suffered by the Israelites and their descendants (R, Z) or suggest that God’s anger refers to His punishment of them in the Hereafter, while the abasement refers to their future adversity in this world (Z). Others argue that the Israelites’ repentance and atonement (in 2:61) meant that their punishment would be only in this world and not in the next (R). Those who fabricate refers to those who initiate false religious beliefs or practices (see, e.g., 4:48–50; 5:103; 6:93; 10:59–60; 16:56).

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But as for those who commit evil deeds and then repent thereafter and believe, surely, thereafter, thy Lord is Forgiving, Merciful.

153 The reminder that God forgives those who are truly repentant and mend their ways is found throughout the Quran (e.g., 2:160; 3:89; 5:39; 16:119). In 4:17 the Quran states, God only accepts the repentance of those who do evil in ignorance and then turn quickly in repentance, and in v. 149 it is clear that the Israelites’ repentance is quick and unconditional.
And when the anger abated from Moses, he took up the Tablets; and in their inscription lay a guidance and a mercy for those who are in awe of their Lord.

Moses took up the Tablets after previously casting them down in anger (v. 150). In their inscription lay a guidance and a mercy may simply indicate that the contents of the Tablets—namely, the Torah—contained guidance and mercy (Ṭ, Z)—a description associated with both the Torah and the Quran (see, e.g., 6:154; 7:52; 16:64; 28:43; 31:2–3). InSCRIPTION here translates nuskhah, a word that generally denotes a written copy of something, but whose root meaning relates to substituting one thing for another, particularly as regards a text. Some commentators therefore understand nuskhah as referring to new Tablets that Moses was given, which contained a “copy” of what had been inscribed on the originals (Q, R). Nuskhah may also refer more generally to the notion that guidance and mercy were inscribed upon, or copied onto, the Torah Tablets from the heavenly Preserved Tablet (see 85:22c), from which all Divine Revelation derives (Q).

And Moses chose seventy men from his people for Our meeting. And when the earthquake seized them, he said, “My Lord! Hadst Thou willed, Thou wouldst have destroyed them and me beforehand. Wilt Thou destroy us for that which the fools among us have done? It is naught but Thy trial, whereby Thou leadest astray whomsoever Thou wilt, and guidest whomsoever Thou wilt. Thou art our Protector, so forgive us and have mercy upon us, and Thou art the best of forgivers!

Most commentators indicate that this meeting with the elders followed upon the calf incident and was connected with the Israelites’ attempt to atone for their sin. The seventy chosen by Moses, at God’s command, were said to be among those elders who had not directly participated in making or worshipping the calf (R). Some reports say that Moses chose six men from each of the twelve tribes for
a total of seventy-two men; two of those, Joshua and Caleb, were chosen to remain behind and supervise the Israelites in the camp (R, Ṭ, Th, Z). The other seventy were instructed to fast and purify themselves and their clothing in preparation for the meeting (R, Ṭ, Th, Z). When they approached the mountain, **the earthquake seized them; earthquake** translates *rajjah*, the same word used to denote the physical event that destroyed the Thamūd (v. 78) and the people of Midian (v. 91). This *earthquake* was meant as a punishment for the seventy, who had not worshipped the calf, but nonetheless had not done enough to stop those who did (Mw, R). Some commentators indicate that the elders were, in fact, killed by the quake, but then revived at Moses’ plea (R, Ṭ); others say that the quake shook them violently, but relented before they died (R).

A common narrative associated with this verse connects it with the incident in which the Israelites ask to see God openly (2:55). According to this account, as Moses and the seventy elders approached Mt. Sinai, a cloud descended and enveloped the mountain. Moses entered the cloud alone, but the elders followed. As they entered they were cast down prostrate, but could hear Moses speaking with God. Eventually the cloud lifted, and they approached Moses and asked to see God directly, at which **the earthquake seized them** for their insolence (Mw, Ṭ, Th, Z).

**Hadst Thou willed, Thou wouldst have destroyed them and me beforehand** is said to indicate that Moses would have preferred that, if God intended to kill them, He would have done so while they were still in the camp, for he feared that if God killed the elders on the mountain, the Israelites would blame Moses for their deaths (R). **Wilt Thou destroy us for that which the fools among us have done, the fools being those Israelites who directly participated in the calf worship.** According to al-Rāzī, Moses knew that God would not punish some for the sins of others, and his question was a way of indicating that he was, in fact, certain that God would not do this, as if to say, “I know Thou wouldst not destroy us for the wrongdoing of others” (R)—an interpretation apparently supported by Moses’ subsequent statement, **It is naught but Thy trial.** That some are guided by the trial while others are led astray by it is similar to what is said in other verses regarding Divine Revelation and its dichotomous effect on different souls (cf. 2:26; 9:124–25). That God may both guide and lead astray is also found throughout the Quran (see, e.g., 6:39; 7:178; 13:27; 14:4; 16:93; 17:97; 18:17; 35:8); some Muslim theologians argue that such statements indicate that all faith or disbelief is determined by God, and others argue that God leads people astray only as a punishment for previous wrongdoing or iniquity.

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And prescribe good for us in the life of this world, and
in the Hereafter; truly we have turned unto Thee.” He said, “I cause My Punishment to smite whomsoever I will, though My Mercy encompasses all things. I shall prescribe it for those who are reverent, and give alms, and those who believe in Our signs,

156 Moses’ supplication beseeching God for good . . . in the life of this world, and in the Hereafter is an example of the proper mode of supplication for believers; see also 2:201. Good . . . in the life of this world may mean physical goods, such as health and physical well-being (Sh, Z), but may also mean moral integrity and success in obeying God’s commandments (Q, Sh, Ṭ, Z); good in the Hereafter means forgiveness for one’s sins and reward in Paradise for one’s good deeds (Q, Sh, Ṭ, Z). Praying for good only in this life would be a sign of worldliness, whereas praying for good only in the Hereafter might indicate a failure to recognize one’s dependence on God in this life and His ability or willingness to intervene in worldly matters.

We have turned unto Thee means that they turn in repentance to God (Ṭ, Z). According to al-Rāzī, because God is a Protector for His servants and because Moses and his people have expressed sincere repentance and humility (v. 155), it is appropriate for them to seek from God both protection against harm and the acquisition of benefit (R). He said refers to God’s response, which begins with the warning, I cause My Punishment to smite whomsoever I will (man ashāʾ). Some see this phrase as a specific reference to the earthquake that seized the Israelites in v. 155 (Sh) or to the atonement ordained by God in 2:54 that they should “slay their own,” thus indicating that Moses has no power to deflect the punishment that God has decreed. Although this line asserts God’s freedom and power to punish as He wishes, commentators often qualify this to mean that He punishes only those deserving of it, in accordance with His Wisdom (Q, Z). Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) reads this line slightly differently to mean “I cause My Punishment to smite whosoever does evil (man asāʾa)” (Bg, R, Z). God’s Mercy, unlike His punishment, is an essential Attribute of God and thus infinite and eternal (Qu).

My Mercy encompasses all things is a statement that has great metaphysical importance in Islamic thought. It is similar to 40:7, where those who bear the Divine Throne say, Our Lord, Thou dost encompass all things in Mercy and Knowledge; so forgive those who repent and follow Thy way, and shield them from the punishment of Hellfire. God’s Knowledge is the only other Divine Attribute described in such an all-embracing manner in the Quran (cf. 6:80; 7:89; 20:98; 65:12). The preeminence of God’s Mercy is expressed in the well-known ḥadīth qudsī (sacred ḥadīth) in which God states, “My Mercy precedes My
Wrath,” and in other verses God is said to have prescribed Mercy for Himself (see 6:12–13c; 6:54). Some commentators understand these verses, including the present one, to indicate that God’s Mercy is infinite (Q) and that it is tantamount to His Will for the good in and for all created beings (R). Commentators assert that God’s all-embracing Mercy is the source of every mercy between human beings, and even between animals, who manifest God’s Mercy in their tenderness and attachment to their young (IK, Q, R).

God’s Mercy, as manifested in His Forgiveness, is said to be so vast that even Iblīs will stretch forth his neck on the Day of Resurrection, hoping to be touched by it (IK). Indeed, some commentators observe that Iblīs too is embraced by God’s Mercy insofar as he exists (Q). This alludes to the more profound point made by some commentators and Islamic metaphysicians that there is a fundamental connection between Divine Mercy and existence itself (R; Ibn ʿArabī, Futūḥāt, III, 429). Mercy translates raḥmah, from the same root as the word for “womb” (raḥīm). God’s Mercy thus embraces creation as the womb embraces the unborn child and brings it into the world. For Ibn ʿArabī and many other Sufis, existence itself is none other than Divine Mercy, and the “Breath of the Compassionate” (nafas al-Raḥmān) is the very substance of the universe through which all things are brought into being and sustained and to which all things return (Ibn ʿArabī, Futūḥāt, II, 313.24–25; III, 429.4–16).

Some commentators maintain that Divine Mercy, while described here as “embracing all things,” is nonetheless meant specifically for the believers (IJ, R). Other Islamic thinkers, however, have delineated two kinds of Divine Mercy: one is universal, infinite, bestowed upon all creatures in this world, and metaphysically identical to existence itself; and the other is particular and specific, bestowed upon those who have earned it through belief and righteousness (Ibn ʿArabī; R; Sy). It is this specific mercy that is alluded to in the subsequent statement, I shall prescribe it for those who are reverent, and give alms, and those who believe in Our signs. The reverent here indicates those who are marked by piety and who avoid idolatry and major sins (IK); those who give alms (zakāh) may here refer to those who give the zakāh in the sense of alms to the poor, but may also refer to those who engage in the purification of souls (zakāt al-nufūs; IJ, IK, Mw,Ts). The Israelites who followed Moses as well as the pious among the People of the Book in general may be described by these qualities and hence are recipients of this specific Divine Mercy.

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those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, whom they find inscribed in the Torah and the
Gospel that is with them, who enjoins upon them what is right, and forbids them what is wrong, and makes good things lawful for them, and forbids them bad things, and relieves them of their burden and the shackles that were upon them. Thus those who believe in him, honor him, help him, and follow the light that has been sent down with him; it is they who shall prosper.”

157 This verse continues the list of qualities that describe those for whom God will prescribe His Mercy (v. 156). They include following the Messenger; that is, the Prophet Muhammad, who is uniquely identified in the Quran and Islamic tradition as the unlettered Prophet (al-nabī al-ummī). The description of the Prophet as unlettered (ummī) is traditionally understood to mean that he was unable to read and write (Ṭ), a fact that is affirmed in various ways in the sīrah, or biographical literature concerning him. That the Prophet was unable to read and write serves, in Islamic tradition, as a fundamental proof of the miraculous nature of the Quran and the purity of the soul of the Prophet who was the recipient of it (R) and of its Divine provenance, since it would be otherwise impossible for a man who had not “studied” earlier works to produce eloquent verses containing knowledge of past peoples and prophets (cf. 6:105, which implies that the pagan Arabs accused the Prophet of having studied). That the Prophet was unlettered is understood to mean that his soul was not defiled by profane knowledge and that it was a tabula rasa upon which the Divine Word could be “inscribed” in its purest form, untainted by humanly acquired knowledge and learning. This doctrine is analogous in an essential way to the virginal purity of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who represented a pure conduit through which Jesus, described as a Word from God (3:45)—like the Quran, which is the Divine Word—could be brought into the world. Ummī is also related directly to umm, “mother.” The Sufi master Ibn ʿArabī thus understands ummi as a kind of spiritual “infancy” (Futūḥāt, II, 644–45), connoting a state devoid of external, discursive knowledge, for God brought you forth from the bellies of your mothers, knowing naught (16:78), but also in a state of innocence, purity, and utter receptivity.

Although in one instance the plural of this term (ummiyun) is used to refer to uneducated or illiterate Jews (see 2:78c), unlettered (ummī) when used in relation to the Prophet Muhammad also seems to be related to his place in sacred history in that he was not of Jewish origin, but rather hailed from the Arab people, who were largely (though not entirely) “illiterate” at this time (Iṣ, R, Ṭs) and who had not read or studied the Torah, in particular. In 6:156, for example, the pagan Arabs are
described as those who have not studied previous scriptures, and in 34:44 as those without any book that they study. In 7:169, by contrast, those who were given the covenant of the Book, meaning the People of the Book, are described as those who have studied what is in it. Thus when ummi is used, as it is in the present verse, in the context of a discussion of the People of the Book (cf. 3:20; 62:2), it may be intended to indicate not only that the Prophet had not studied previous scriptures, but also that he was of non-Jewish heritage, since the Jews, in particular, were skeptical about Muhammad’s prophethood at least partly because he was not a prophet in the Israelite line. Some have added that ummi can also be related to Makkah—that is, that Muhammad was the “Makkan Prophet”—insofar as Makkah is described as the Mother of Cities (Umm al-qurā) in 42:7 (Ṭs).

The Prophet is also said here to be inscribed in the Torah and the Gospel, meaning for most commentators that the qualities that identify and describe him as a prophet are mentioned in the Torah and the Gospel (Ṭ). See 61:6, where Jesus says that he brings glad tidings of a Messenger to come after him whose name is Ahmad—Ahmad is one of the most often used names of the Prophet in the Islamic tradition (see 61:6c). According to a hadīth, the Prophet was described in the Torah with some of the same qualities attributed to him in the Quran, including that he is a giver of glad tidings and a warner, that he does not do evil to those who do evil to him, that he is kind and forgiving, that he is not rude or loud in the marketplace, and that he is a guardian for the unlettered (ummiyūn), here probably referring to the Arabs. The hadīth goes on to say that he will cause even those who are astray to utter, “There is no god but God,” and hence open eyes, ears, and hearts (Q, Ṭ). Some commentators mention particular statements in the Torah and Gospel that were interpreted by Muslims as references to the coming of the Prophet Muhammad, including prophecies about the descendants of Ishmael in Genesis 16–17 and Jesus’ reference to a spiritual “comforter,” the “Paraclete” (Fāraqlīṭ, which was understood to mean Ahmad), who would come after him and “will speak whatever he hears” (John 16:7–14; Ṭs).

The Prophet enjoins upon them what is right, and forbids them what is wrong, which is a moral requirement and characteristic of every believer and of the believing community mentioned in several verses; see 3:110, 114; 9:67, 71; 22:41; 31:17; and the essay “Quranic Ethics, Human Rights, and Society.” The Prophet makes good things lawful for them, meaning that through his prophethood the ritualistic restrictions that the pagan Arabs had placed on themselves, without Divine sanction, were abolished (Ṭ; see 5:103c). He also forbids them bad things, such as the consumption of swine flesh and the practice of usury (Ṭ). He relieves them, in this case the Jews, of their burden and the shackles that were upon them, referring to some of the difficult and onerous commands and prohibitions in the Torah (Z), which the Jews were specifically obligated to follow as part of the covenant they made with God (Ṭ, Ṭs), but which were abrogated by the Quran. In
this regard, the commentators mention a prohibition against taking spoils in warfare in earlier scriptures (Ṭ, Z) as well as certain dietary restrictions. See also 3:50, where Jesus confirms the Torah, but also makes *lawful . . . part of that which was forbidden unto you*. The light that has been sent down with him refers to the Quran (Z), which along with other scriptures is described as being or containing light (see 5:15c; 3:184; 6:91).

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Say, “O mankind! Truly I am the Messenger of God unto you all—Him to Whom belongs Sovereignty over the heavens and the earth. There is no god but He. He gives life and causes death. So believe in God and His Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, who believes in God and His Words; and follow him, that haply you may be guided.”

158 In this verse, the Quran interrupts the account of Moses and his people to issue a command to the Prophet to identify himself as *the Messenger of God unto you all*. This statement, situated at the end of a series of accounts about previous prophets, is understood by some commentators to mean that the Prophet Muhammad is distinguished from earlier prophets in that each of those prophets was a prophet to his people or the people of his region, but Muhammad is a prophet for all of humanity (R, Ṭ). In a ḥadīth, the Prophet states that his having been sent to all humanity is one of five distinctions given specifically to him by God (IK, Ṭ). The claim of such a distinction for Muhammad may be based upon the fact that the Prophet’s mission was to both the People of the Book and the “unlettered”—that is, the Arabs or those without a scripture (see 3:20). Although the universality of the Prophet’s mission is supported by several verses describing the Quran or the Prophet as a *reminder for the worlds* (6:90; 12:104; 38:87; 68:52; 81:27), the assertion that he was completely unique in this regard does not seem to be entirely consistent with other Quranic verses that, for example, describe the Book brought by Moses as a *guidance for mankind* (6:91) or describe Jesus, Mary, and Noah as a *sign for the worlds* (see 21:91; 29:15). Moreover, the quality of universality cannot be entirely unique to Muhammad, insofar as Adam could also be described as a prophet for all human beings (R).

That God gives *life and causes death* is found throughout the Quran (2:258; 3:156; 9:116; 10:56; 23:80; 40:68; 44:8; 53:44; 57:2) and is reflected in the Divine Names *al-Muḥyī* (the One who gives life) and *al-Mumīt* (the One who causes
death). *His Words*, which the unlettered Prophet believes in, are all of God’s signs (T), or the three Abrahamic scriptures—the Torah, the Gospel, and the Quran (Q), and by implication all sacred scriptures. According to some reports, *His Words* refers specifically to Jesus, the prophet who most closely precedes Muhammad and who is referred to as a *Word from God* (3:45; T), although such an interpretation seems less plausible in this context.

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And among the people of Moses is a community that guides by the truth and does justice thereby.

159 Commentators differed regarding the identity of a community (*ummah*) among the followers of Moses that guides by the truth and does justice, that is, renders judgment according to the principles of truth (R). See also v. 181, where the same description is given to a community among those We have created.

Despite the clear statement in this verse that among the people of Moses—that is, the Jews—are those who are just and rightly guided, commentators have often sought to limit the application of this statement. According to some legendary accounts, for example, the *ummah* in the present verse refers to a group (or a tribe) of Israelites who separated themselves from the rest, when the latter began to go astray, and then traveled eastward beyond China (Q, R, T). Some say that they continue to live according to the law brought by Moses, although others say they became Muslims (Q, R, Th). Still others assert that this is a reference to those Jews in Madinah in the Prophet’s time who became Muslims, although this seems inconsistent with the verse’s description of this group as a community (*ummah*), which often connotes an independent religious community or at least a sizable group of people (R). Moreover, Jews who became Muslim were thereafter considered part of the Muslim *ummah*, rather than a separate *ummah* unto themselves.

These various attempts to qualify the reference to this righteous *ummah* among the people of Moses contradict the plain sense of the verse, which indicates that a group among the people of Moses, in the sense of being followers of Jewish Law and ritual, continue to live and worship righteously according to the teachings of the Torah. Other verses support the literal reading as well, including v. 168, which indicates that there were communities of righteous Jews still existing at the time of the revelation of the Quran (see also 3:113–15, 199 and commentary). The commentators do not usually support the most literal and obvious meaning of this verse, however, perhaps because it seems inconsistent with the common interpretation of v. 157 as meaning that all human beings should recognize and
And We divided them into twelve tribes, communities. And We revealed to Moses, when his people asked him for water, “Strike the rock with thy staff.” Then twelve springs gushed forth from it: all the people knew their drinking place. And We shaded them with clouds, and sent down manna and quails upon them, “Eat of the good things We have provided you.” And they wronged Us not, but themselves did they wrong.

And when it was said unto them, “Settle in this town, and eat of that which is therein wheresoever you will, and say, ‘Remove the burden!’ And enter the gate prostrating, that We may forgive you your iniquities. We shall increase the virtuous.”

Then those among them who did wrong substituted a word other than that which had been said unto them. So We sent down upon them a torment from heaven for the wrong they used to do.

160–62 Cf. 2:57–60 for a similar account of these events. Regarding the division of the Israelites into twelve tribes, see also 5:12: God had made a covenant with the Children of Israel, and We raised among them twelve chieftains. For Moses’ striking of the rock and the gushing forth of twelve streams, see 2:60c. The Bible, in Exodus 15:27, mentions the Israelites coming upon a place in the desert called Elim, where there were twelve wells, and Exodus 17:1–6 recounts Moses being instructed by God to strike a rock with his staff to produce water for his people, although no mention is made of twelve springs specifically. Regarding God’s shading the Israelites and providing them with manna and quails and the command to eat of the good things We have provided you, see commentary.
on a nearly identical passage in 2:57; see also 20:80–81. The Quran repeatedly exhorts people to eat the wholesome and lawful food provided by God; for other examples not exclusively addressed to the Israelites, see 2:168, 172; 6:141–42; 16:69, 114; 23:51; 67:15.

Regarding the command that begins Settle in this town, see 2:58c and the brief allusion to it in 4:154. The town here is said by some to be Jerusalem (T, Z) or the land of Syria (or Palestine) generally (Mw). Remove the burden is an exclamation the Israelites are told to utter, indicating their desire to be forgiven for their sins (T).

Regarding the Israelites substituting another word for the word of repentance they had been commanded to say, see commentary on 2:58–59. The word of repentance was ḥiṭṭah, here translated remove the burden. The Israelites are reported to have said, instead, ḥinṭah, meaning “wheat,” as an act of defiance and ridicule. Torment from heaven translates rijz, which can also mean punishment and defilement and can, moreover, be a general reference to God’s Wrath.

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And ask them about the town that was by the sea, when they transgressed the Sabbath. Their fish would come to them, surfacing on the day of their Sabbath, but on the day when they did not observe the Sabbath, they would not come to them. Thus did We try them for their having been iniquitous.

The commentators speculate about the town that was by the sea; some reports identify it as a town called Aylah (Eilat), between Midian and Sinai, while others say that it refers to Tiberias or Midian itself (T, Ṭs, Z). They—that is, the Israelites—transgressed the Sabbath by performing acts, such as working, that God had forbidden on the day that was reserved for worship alone. Although in Islam there is no “Sabbath” in the same sense that one practices it in Judaism, with its extensive set of ritual practices and proscriptions, the Quran nonetheless understands the observation of the Sabbath to be a requirement established in the Torah for the Children of Israel and the Jews (the Quran uses both terms) in particular (see also 2:65; 4:47, 154; 16:124).

According to the present verse, on the day of their Sabbath, the Israelite people of this town would fish, although this was against the rules pertaining to the Sabbath, and the fish would appear all around them on the surface of the water (T).
But on other days of the week, *when they did not observe the Sabbath*, and so hunting and fishing were permitted, the fish would remain hidden below the surface. This situation thus made it tempting for the Israelites to fish on the Sabbath (R), since fishing was especially easy and fruitful on that day. In this sense, it was a way for God to *try them for their having been iniquitous*. According to one report, the question of fishing on the Sabbath divided the Israelites in the town; a third of them wanted to fish, a third admonished against it, and a third neither fished themselves, nor admonished others (Aj, JJ, Sy).

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164 And when a community among them said, “Why do you admonish a people whom God is about to destroy or punish with a severe punishment?” They said, “As an excuse before your Lord, and that haply they may be reverent.”

164 A community among them refers to those Israelites in the town who did not participate in fishing on the Sabbath, but also did not admonish those who did (R, Ṭ). Here this group addresses those who tried actively to forbid or discourage those fishing on the Sabbath, asking why they make the effort to *admonish a people whom God is about to destroy or punish*. Their response is that it serves as an excuse before God, meaning that they consider themselves to be obligated to “forbid wrong,” and having done so, they have fulfilled their moral duty (IK, Ṭ). *And that haply they may be reverent* indicates that the admonishers also hoped that their warnings might succeed in bringing the Sabbath violators back to reverence for God and for Mosaic Law.

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165 And when they forgot that whereof they had been reminded, We saved those who forbade evil, and We seized those who did wrong with a dreadful punishment for their having committed iniquity.

165 When those who were violating the Sabbath *forgot that whereof they had been reminded* by those who admonished them, God punished the violators and *saved those who forbade evil*—that is, by exhorting their fellow Israelites to
observe the Sabbath. The commentators are divided on the fate of those who abstained both from fishing on the Sabbath and from forbidding others to do so (Mw, R); some consider them to be among the saved (Z).

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When they were insolent concerning that which they had been forbidden, We said unto them, “Be you apes, outcast.”

166 When the Sabbath violators continued to be insolent concerning the Sabbath, despite the warnings and reminders they had been given, they were punished severely. Be you apes, outcast is understood by many commentators to mean that they were physically transformed into apes, since the Divine imperative here may be taken to be a command that brings the named thing into being (Ṭ, Z). But some reject this literal reading and suggest, rather, that the hearts of the Sabbath violators were transformed to be like those of apes, but not their physical form; on this statement, see 2:65c. The Divine imperative Be you apes, outcast may also indicate that God is leaving them to indulge their baser instincts, which can lead only to their humiliation and their being outcast in their community. The latter seems consistent with the Biblical statement that one who works on the Sabbath shall be “cut off from among the people” (Exodus 31:14).

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And when thy Lord proclaimed that He would surely send against them, till the Day of Resurrection, those who would inflict upon them a terrible punishment. Truly thy Lord is swift in retribution, and truly He is Forgiving, Merciful.

167 Thy Lord proclaimed indicates that He decreed, commanded, or swore (Ṭ, Ts). That He will send against them . . . those who would inflict . . . punishment may mean that He will grant other people authority over them (Ţs, Z). Some mention that prior to the coming of Islam the Zoroastrian Persians (Z) as well as the Greeks, Romans, and Christians (IK) had gained authority over the Jewish community. Those whom God “sends against them” could also refer to the Arabs or
Muslims (IK, Ṭ, Ṭs), who assumed political authority over much of the Jewish population after the early Islamic conquests. See 2:61 and 3:112, which speak of the Israelites as having been struck with abasement for their transgressions, understood by some commentators as indicating a state of weakness for them relative to other peoples (Ṭ, Ṭs). See also 17:5–8, where the Quran mentions the destruction of Jewish homes and land as well as their Temple by others possessed of great might. All of this suggests that the punishment Jews received for their transgressions occurred in this world and was inherited by later generations of their descendants, which is similar to the perspective found in the Hebrew scriptures, although from the Islamic perspective this does not exclude punishment in the Hereafter. Unlike the people of Noah, Hūd, Ṣālih, Lot, and Shu'ayb, the Israelites were not destroyed as a people, but their transgenerational punishment in this world extends the point made by those earlier accounts that Divine punishment can be meted out in this life as well as in the Hereafter; on this subject, see also 2:84c. God is swift in retribution against those who invite His Punishment through their disobedience and lack of faith, but Forgiving and Merciful toward the repentant (Ṭ, Z). See also 6:165c on that same description of God.

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168 And We divided them into communities on the earth: some of them are righteous and some are otherwise. And We tried them with good things and with evil things, that haply they would return.

168 That the Israelites are divided . . . into communities on the earth is taken as a reference to the Diaspora, the existence of smaller communities of Jews in various locations throughout the world (Ṭ). Some of them are righteous: a life of righteousness continues to be possible for those who follow Jewish Law and ritual as prescribed in the Torah, as indicated, for example, by the importance the Quran places on the observance of the Sabbath, a ritual that has no direct parallel in Islam (see 7:163c). Those who are otherwise refers to those who do not follow the law, although they continue to be members of this community. Many commentators tend to see the Quranic affirmation of righteousness among some Jews (e.g., in v. 159; 3:113, 199) to pertain to the Jewish community of the past, before the coming of the Prophet Muhammad or even before the coming of Jesus (Ṭ, Ṭs), or else to the Jews in Madinah who became Muslim (R). Such interpretations are open to question, however, because the verse is clearly in the present tense, indicating that it pertains to the present and the indefinite future, and the reference is seemingly to those who
have remained Jews, not those who have joined the Islamic community. The good things with which God tries them include worldly provision and ease; the evil things are various forms of worldly adversity. The trial by both good and bad fortune is not particular to the Jewish population, but is meant in a more general sense; see 21:35: *We try you with evil and with good, as a test, and unto Us shall you be returned.*

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169 Then a generation succeeded them who inherited the Book. They grasp the ephemeralities of this lower world and say, “It will be forgiven us.” And if other ephemeralities like them were to come their way, they would grasp them [also]. Did not the covenant of the Book commit them to say naught of God save the truth? They have studied what is in it. And the Abode of the Hereafter is better for those who are reverent. Will you not understand?

169 The generation who succeeded the followers of Moses is understood by commentators to refer to some later Jews, and Jewish religious leaders in particular, who brought about a certain corruption in the teachings and Law of Moses by allowing some commands and prohibitions to be neglected (R, Ṭ, Z). Some commentators suggest that certain Jewish leaders took bribery in exchange for easing the requirements of the law for certain people (R, Ṭ, Z). See also 19:59, regarding the descendants of Abraham and Israel: *Then they were succeeded by a generation who neglected prayer and followed base desires.* The corrupt among this later generation *grasp the ephemeralities of this lower world,* meaning that they take whatever they desire of fleeting, worldly things, whether they are lawful or unlawful, or even sinful, and assume they will be forgiven for it. Other Quranic passages suggest that certain Jews were overly confident about God’s leniency in judgment toward them; see 2:80 and 3:24, where they claim, *the Fire will not touch us save for days numbered.* Yet if other ephemeralities come to them, they grasp those as well, indicating that they are not truly repentant, and that their intention is to persist in their acts of disobedience.

The covenant of the Book refers to the covenantal obligations imposed on the Jews by the Torah, one of which was to speak only truthfully about God in
accordance with what is taught in the scripture, including that God’s forgiveness is only for those who are truly repentant and mend their ways, not for those who persist in their errors (Z). For Quranic statements about this see, for example, 16:119: Then truly thy Lord—for those who commit evil in ignorance, then later repent and make amends—truly thy Lord thereafter is Forgiving, Merciful. That for the reverent the Hereafter is better than this world is also mentioned in 4:77 and 6:32.

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As for those who cling to the Book and perform the prayer—surely We neglect not the reward of the workers of righteousness.

170 Those who cling to the Book means those who continue to adhere to the teachings, commands, and prohibitions established in the Torah (Q, Ṭ). That God does not neglect . . . the reward of those who are righteous means that He will not fail to reward them for their deeds (cf. 3:171; 9:120; 11:115; 12:56, 90; 18:30). This verse indicates that those who are Jews and continue to follow the Torah and Mosaic Law will be rewarded for their good deeds; see also 2:62, which states that Jews, Sabeans, and Christians who believe and “work righteousness” shall have their reward with their Lord (cf. 5:69).

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And when We lifted the mountain above them, as if it were a canopy, and they thought it would fall upon them, “Take hold of that which We have given you with strength, and remember what is therein, that haply you may be reverent.”

171 That God lifted the mountain above them is similar to the description We raised the Mount over them in 2:63, 93 and 4:154, and in all cases refers to the making of the covenant at Sinai, as mentioned explicitly in these three verses. We lifted translates nataqna, a verb that means literally to pluck something out from its roots and suggests God’s removing the mountain physically from its earthly base and causing it to hover above them as if it were a canopy. Some indicate that this
was done as a means of threatening the Israelites to accept the covenant of the Torah, as some of them had hesitated because of the difficult nature of the obligations the covenant imposed upon them (IK, R). The command *Take hold of that which We have given you* refers to their covenantal obligation to obey the commands and prohibitions in the Torah.

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172 And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their progeny and made them bear witness concerning themselves, “Am I not your Lord?” they said, “Yea, we bear witness”—lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, “Truly of this we were heedless,”

172 This verse is in many ways the cornerstone of Islamic sacred history and anthropology and establishes that the fundamental relationship between God and all human beings is premised upon the simple, unmediated recognition of His Lordship at the moment of their pretemporal creation (see the essay “The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions”). The event recounted in this verse is widely referred to as a pretemporal covenant (*mithāq*) or pact (*ʿahd*)—although these terms do not appear in the verse itself—made by God with all of humanity prior to their earthly existence (Aj, R, Ṭ). It is connected by commentators with a pretemporal covenant between God and the prophets (3:81; 33:7) and considered by some to be subsequent to it (ST).

The Quran mentions covenants or pacts between God and the believers generally (5:1, 7; 6:152; 13:20, 25; 16:91, 95; 57:8) as well as covenants with Abraham (2:124–25), the Israelites (2:40, 63, 83–84, 93; 4:154; 5:70), the Christians (5:14), and the People of the Book collectively (3:187). But the making of the covenant described in the present verse is unmediated and universal—contracted directly between God and all humanity—and can thus be interpreted as the basis of all later and specific covenants mediated by the prophets. This verse is also connected with the Quranic notion of the *fitrah* (IK, Ṭ), the **primordial nature** (30:30) with which all human beings were originally endowed, indicating that the innate recognition of God’s Oneness constitutes the essence of being human (see 30:30c). Even though human beings do not remember the pretemporal covenant, their testimony to God’s Lordship is understood to have left an indelible imprint upon their souls and to have established moral responsibility for them (Q). When these souls are engendered in earthly bodies and reach the age of moral understanding and accountability, the innate knowledge is
reawakened in those who believe by their encounter with prophetic teachings, scriptures, and Divine laws, which serve as a reminder and renewal of their initial covenant with God (Aj). Therefore, if a child dies before reaching the age of moral and religious responsibility, he or she is considered to have died according to the first covenant (mithāq) and the original fitrah, and so in a state of moral purity. However, for those who fail to affirm the original covenant by rejecting the later covenant—that is, by denying the messages brought to them by their prophets and scriptures—their initial covenant will not benefit them (IK, Q, T, Ts).

Some describe this pretemporal event as one in which God brought forth all the progeny of Adam from his loins, specifically; some argue that this was done immediately after God had blown His Spirit into Adam (15:29; 32:9; 38:72; T), and others debate whether it occurred before or after his fall to earth (Mw, Q). Many observe, however, that God takes the progeny not from Adam, but from the Children of Adam and from their loins (plural; IK, R, T), indicating simply that He brought forth all future generations that have appeared and will appear until the end of time (Mw). Progeny translates dhurriyah (or in some readings, the plural dhurriyāt), which derives from a root that in its most literal sense denotes small particles, atoms, or seeds that are scattered, but also connotes “progeny” or “offspring” in over a dozen Quranic verses (e.g., 2:124; 3:34; 4:9).

Some commentators indicate that the progeny were drawn forth in the form of “particles” or “seeds” (dharr; IK, R, T), suggesting the physically unformed state of the children of Adam during this encounter. But some questioned how it was possible for the progeny as “particles” to hear and respond to God’s question; and because the intellect was not considered to manifest itself in human beings until years after birth, they also questioned how these “particles” knew what they were saying or could be held accountable for it (R). Given these issues, some commentators consider this verse a symbolic description of an innate covenant (Z) or a symbolic description of the temporal process by which human beings realize Divine Oneness—arguing that as individuals grow in intellect and contemplate the world around them, the existence of a single God becomes innately clear to them, and they witness to this truth inwardly (Q, R, Ts, Tū), since they bear this knowledge already in their primordial nature. Others, however, reject this interpretation as against the plain meaning of the text and argue that God temporarily bestowed faculties of intellect, hearing, and speech on the “particles,” or human “seed,” just as He did when He caused the heavens and the earth to respond to Him (41:11; R, T); see also 41:21, where God endows bodily organs and faculties with the ability to testify.

God causes the Children of Adam to bear witness concerning themselves, or “against themselves.” The Quran mentions human beings bearing witness against themselves, in both this world and the Hereafter, through their deeds and their very bodies (cf. 6:130; 7:37; 24:24; 36:65; 41:20–22). In the present verse, their
witnessing takes the form of a response to God’s question *Am I not your Lord?* (*A-laṣtus bi-rabbikum*?), understood to be a declarative statement in the form of a question, requiring the hearers to bear witness to its truth. Poetically, some Muslim authors, such as Rūmī, have described the event in this verse as the “Day of Alast,” referring to the first part of the question *Am I not your Lord?*; “Day of Alast” therefore refers in Islamic thought to a day beyond all days reckoned in time. Their response is *Yea* (*balā*, a classical affirmative connoting certainty), *we bear witness*. Some reports consider *we bear witness* to have been spoken by other witnesses to their testimony—identified variously as the angels, Adam, the heavens and the earth, or God Himself (IJ, IK, Q, R, T)—although most consider this a less likely reading.

The verse ends by explaining that the purpose of this questioning and witnessing was so that human beings could not come on the *Day of Resurrection* claiming to have been unaware of God’s Lordship or their duty to worship Him. One may question how one can be responsible, during earthly life, for a testimony one cannot remember having made prior to coming into this world (R). Some commentators have argued that it is precisely this human inability to remember the event described in this verse that points to its symbolic nature and thus reject the idea that a pretemporal covenant, of which most human beings are not conscious and that they cannot recall, could be the basis of a responsibility that is binding upon them (R). When this verse is read in the wider Quranic context and juxtaposed with Quranic prophetic history, however, this pretemporal recognition of God’s Lordship can be understood as creating an innate disposition in human beings toward recognizing and worshipping God during earthly life and toward accepting the prophets and the messages they bring as “reminders” of what human beings already know inwardly, but have merely forgotten. Those who reject the prophets, therefore, are considered willfully ignorant, denying truths that should, in any sincere and morally uncorrupted soul, resonate with a deep but forgotten knowledge of God that nevertheless still exists within them. In this sense, those who deny and reject the prophetic messages sent to them are described as *kuffār*, a word most commonly translated “disbelievers,” but whose etymological meaning signifies the “covering over” of something, which in the religious sense refers to covering over the innate awareness of the truth of God’s Lordship and Oneness that they bear within themselves. The pretemporal covenant, then, in conjunction with God’s sending of messengers to all people serves as a “proof” against the disbelievers who capriciously or cynically deny prophetic messages that they know deep within themselves to be true.

This verse is also the basis for more elaborate narrations, some of which are attributed to the Prophet, that connect the pretemporal covenant with predestinarian notions. Although the literal reading of this verse suggests that all human beings have made the same covenant recognizing God’s Lordship and therefore have the
same possibility for realizing it in earthly life, several reports suggest that human moral destiny is linked to distinctions made among the covenanters on the occasion of this pretemporal covenant. Some reports assert that God removed some progeny from the right side of Adam or with His Right Hand, and these human beings were destined for the Garden, while others were removed from Adam’s left side or with God’s other Hand and were thus destined for Hell (Q, Ṭ). Still other reports indicate that some covenanters bore witness only reluctantly or deceptively (IJ, Qm, ST, Ṭ), although this interpretation is rejected by other authorities. Some early Twelver Shiite traditions indicate that the covenanters on this day were also asked to bear witness to the prophethood of Muhammad and the spiritual authority of the Shiite Imams, but that only some accepted the latter (ャ Ay, Qm). Similarly, some early Sufi authors, including al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (third/ninth century), referred to the pretemporal covenant as a moment in which the spiritual elect (khawāṣṣ) were distinguished from the common people ('awāmm).

Given the great importance in Islamic thought of this verse and the event it describes, it was natural for some thinkers to link it with various notions of a spiritual hierarchy among human beings and with the concept of predestination. Yet, although this pretemporal covenant may indeed be linked to human moral destiny in a foundational way, because it created in human beings an innate ability to recognize religious truth, the plain meaning of the verse more plausibly indicates the universal potential in all human beings for moral and spiritual attainment and the acceptance of revelation.

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173 or lest you should say, “[It is] only that our fathers ascribed partners unto God beforehand, and we were their progeny after them. Wilt Thou destroy us for that which the falsifiers have done?”

173 This verse indicates that the pretemporal covenant was also made with all, and not some, human beings, so that they could not offer the excuse, on the Day of Judgment, that they were merely following their fathers’ practices of idolatry or “ascribing partners unto God.” In several Quranic accounts, people reject their prophets’ warnings against idolatry and sin by arguing that they are following the practices of their fathers (2:170; 5:104; 7:28; 11:62, 87; 14:10; 21:53–54; 26:74; 31:21; 34:43; 43:22–24). This excuse is dismissed and mocked in the Quran (see 2:170; 5:104; 31:21; 43:24), and the present verse makes it clear that it can never be accepted, since God has endowed all human beings, by virtue of the pretemporal
covenant made with Adam and all his progeny (v. 172), with an innate understanding of religious truth and of His sole Lordship. This basic Quranic teaching is connected to the widespread disparaging in Islamic tradition of “blind imitation,” or taqlīd, of the religious views of others (R). Taqlīd is considered permissible regarding matters of religious Law that are not based necessarily upon an innate moral or spiritual understanding (e.g., the time of day for the canonical prayers or the specific physical movements required in the prayer), and with regard to following the Sunnah, or practice, of the Prophet; but mere taqlīd is not allowed in matters of fundamental religious beliefs and principles, which one must accept with one’s own intelligence to the extent possible. *Wilt Thou destroy us for that which the falsifiers have done?* is similar in form to Moses’ plea to God, *Wilt Thou destroy us for that which fools among us have done?* in v. 155.

Thus do We expound the signs, that haply they may return.

That God “expounds the signs” (see also 6:55, 97–98, 126; 7:32, 52; 9:11; 10:5, 24; 11:1; 13:2; 30:28; and 41:3, where it serves also as the basis for the title of Sūrah 41, “Expounded”) means that He provides a variety of arguments and indications for His Oneness and Lordship; see 6:55c; 41:3c.

And recite unto them the account of the one to whom We gave Our signs, but he cast them off. So Satan made him his follower, and he became one of the deviant.

Had We willed, We would surely have elevated him thereby, but he inclined toward the earth and followed his caprice. Thus his parable is that of a dog: if you attack him, he lolls out his tongue, and if you leave him alone, he lolls out his tongue. That is the likeness of the people who deny Our signs. So recount the stories, that haply they may reflect.
The opening command *recite unto them* is addressed to the Prophet. These verses, coming at the end of several narratives about people who rejected their prophets and the messages and signs they brought may be read as a general warning about the moral fate of those who “cast off” and deny the signs that God has sent them. Al-Rāzī prefers this general reading, but many early commentators considered *the one to whom We gave Our signs* to refer to Balʿām Bāʿūrāʾ (Balaam of Beor)—a spiritually gifted man, capable of receiving certain Divine messages and having his supplications answered by God (Ṭ, Z)—who was compelled or bribed to utter imprecations against Moses (IK, JJ, T, W, Z).

The various narratives of Balaam provided in the Quranic commentaries have many details in common with the Biblical narrative of this same figure (cf. Numbers 22–24), but they also differ, significantly, from it in that the Biblical Balaam—though rebuked by God—refused to curse Moses and his people and instead conveyed God’s blessing upon them. In most Quranic commentary accounts, Balaam is similarly reluctant to curse the Israelites, but in the end is persuaded to do so. Also, reports included in some commentaries identify Balaam as an Israelite, while in the Biblical account he is a prophetic figure from a different people. Thus despite the widespread association of these verses with Balaam, the connection seems tenuous.

Alternately, some reports identify *the one to whom We gave Our signs* as an Arab named Umayyah ibn Abī Ṣalt, who had studied the Jewish and Christian scriptures and hoped he would be the prophet that he believed these sources had been predicting. Unlike many Arabs of his time, he is said to have believed in the Oneness of God and in the Hereafter (R). But when Muhammad arose as a prophet Umayyah was resentful and refused to accept him or the Quranic message (IK, R, T, W).

For those who consider the verses as a reference to Balaam, commentators gloss *Our signs* here as referring to either Balaam’s “prophethood” generally (Ṭ) or his reported knowledge of the “greatest Name of God” (Ṭ), although it more likely indicates knowledge of the scriptures, which would apply in all interpretations of the verse (JJ, T, Z). This knowledge was then *cast . . . off*, “like a snake shedding its skin” (JJ), when he abandoned and denied the signs. *Satan made him his follower* may also be interpreted to mean “Satan overtook him,” as one overtakes another on a path (R, Z). In either case this verse suggests that rejecting God’s signs leaves one vulnerable to the influence of Satan (cf. 15:42, which says that Satan does not have authority over God’s faithful servants).

*Had We willed, We would surely have elevated him thereby,* that is, by virtue of the signs he had been given (v. 175). Some understand this statement to mean that God did not will him to be spiritually ennobled in this way and thus caused or allowed him to turn his back on these signs (R). It could also be interpreted, by contrast, to mean that had God willed, He could have compelled him to remain
faithful to the signs that he had been given, but allowed him instead to make freely his own moral choice (Z). That the person inclined toward the earth and followed his caprice means that he became enamored of worldly goods and pursued them (IK, R, Ṭ, Z).

The comparison of those who deny God’s signs to a dog (a ritually unclean animal in many interpretations of Islamic Law), which “lolls out its tongue” (or “pants”) whether “attacked” or “left alone,” suggests that such people are devoid of the spiritual discernment to know what is good or harmful for them and are thus impervious to guidance (IK, R, Ṭ, Z). It is similar to the idea expressed in 2:6: Truly it is the same for the disbelievers whether thou warnest them or warnest them not; they do not believe. Other verses compare human beings to cattle (see 7:179) and frightened asses (see 74:49–51) to indicate their lack of spiritual discernment; see also 2:65c.

For al-Rāżī, these verses serve as a warning to all people of learning that the spiritual knowledge they have been given by God can be removed if they incline toward base desires and worldly concerns, citing the hadīth, “Whoever increases in knowledge, but does not increase in guidance, increases in naught but distance from God” (R). The command recount the stories is addressed to the Prophet, and the stories refers to the accounts of past communities mentioned in this sūrah.

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177 Evil is the parable of the people who denied Our signs and wronged themselves.

This verse suggests that the foregoing discussion of the one to whom We gave Our signs, but he cast them off (v. 175) is meant to refer in a general way to all those who reject the signs given to them. In doing so, they “wrong themselves,” an idea that recurs throughout the Quran (see, e.g., 9:70; 16:33; 29:40; 30:9).

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178 Whomsoever God guides, he is rightly guided; and whomsoever He leads astray, it is they who are the losers.

That God guides, but may also “lead astray,” is indicated in several verses, causing some to hold that all guidance and leading astray is a matter of God’s Will (R). Whomsoever God guides is said to be rightly guided, so that none shall lead him astray (39:37), while whomsoever He leads astray are losers, in
both this world and the Hereafter (R), and are elsewhere said to have no protector (17:97; 18:17). Although this is presented as a matter of God’s Will (6:125; 74:31), God is said, more specifically, to “lead astray” the iniquitous (2:26), the disbelievers (40:74), and the prodigal doubter (40:34), suggesting to many theologians that God leads people astray only as a consequence or punishment for their actions (Ts).

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We have indeed created for Hell many among jinn and men: they have hearts with which they understand not; they have eyes with which they see not; and they have ears with which they hear not. Such as these are like cattle. Nay, they are even further astray. It is they who are heedless.

179 The meaning of God’s having created for Hell many among jinn and men goes to the heart of the issue of the relationship between human and Divine control of human moral choice and destiny. For many Ash’arites, the verse should be read literally to mean that God created certain human beings and jinn in such a way that they are innately inclined toward acts that lead inevitably to their perdition (R). For those who preferred this literal reading, the verse is consistent with other verses indicating that God guides some and misleads others (see 7:178c). It is also consistent with several aḥādīth, including one that indicates that while the child is still unborn, God commands an angel to write down his or her worldly provision, life span, works, and fate as either blissful or wretched in the Hereafter (IK).

Mu’tazilites and many others, however, read the verse to mean that God has foreknowledge of individuals’ moral choices and destinies, but does not determine them (T). The statement that He created them for Hell may simply be meant to indicate their final end, as if to say, “We have created many jinn and men only to have them end up in Hellfire”; or it may express the idea that some jinn and men are so deeply entrenched in disbelief that it is as if they were created for Hell (Z). For Mu’tazilites, interpreting this verse to mean that God literally creates some individuals to disobey His commands would be to assert that God has given certain individuals moral commands that they are innately incapable of fulfilling, something that would be futile, unjust, and unmerciful and thus cannot be attributed to God (R). Moreover, they note that a literal reading of this verse would conflict with a literal reading of other verses, such as 51:56: I did not create jinn and mankind, save to worship Me.

The eyes, the ears, and the heart—the last of which is considered the seat of
understanding, intelligence, and knowledge (R)—comprise the faculties and organs by which individuals can be guided to the truth (IK). But for some people, these faculties do not fulfill their Divinely intended function (see e.g., 2:18; 18:101; 47:23), either because God has “sealed” or “covered” them (see, e.g., 2:7; 47:16) or because human beings have refused to employ them properly. Their hearts do not contemplate the various signs of God and His Oneness or the messages sent through His prophets (Ṭ, Z); their eyes do not see the obvious signs of God’s creative Power in the world around them (Aj, Qu, Ṭ); and their ears do not hear the teachings of the scriptures (Ṭ, Z), but only the call of temptation (Qu). See 41:5, where the disbelievers say to the Prophet, Our hearts are under coverings from that to which you call us, and in our ears is a deafness, and between us and you there is a veil.

Finally, the verse compares such persons to cattle (see also 25:44), for cattle do not possess an intellect with which to understand religious truth (Ṭ, Z). Those who do not employ their intellect are thus no better than beasts (R)—in fact, they are even worse for squandering the gift of intellect, which they have been given precisely for the purpose of discerning truth. Like cattle, such persons are concerned only with fulfilling base desires for food and comfort (Aj). The verse then asserts that they are even further astray than cattle, since even cattle know enough to flee from what is harmful for them and to seek out what nourishes them (Aj, R, Ṭ, Z), while the disbelievers work toward their own spiritual destruction. Moreover, Islamic tradition holds that animals and all natural phenomena recognize their Creator, but the disbelievers do not (R); and although cattle can be guided by the call of their herdsman, even if they hear it only as a call and a shout (2:171), the disbelievers refuse to be guided at all (IK).

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Unto God belong the Most Beautiful Names; so call Him by them, and leave those who deviate with regard to His Names. Soon they shall be recompensed for that which they used to do.

Following the mention of those who are heedless in v. 179, this verse instructs people to call upon God with His Most Beautiful Names. The verb that translates call upon also means “to supplicate” and is here connected by commentators with the practice of remembering and invoking God (dhikr; R). This verse is thus one of the scriptural bases for the practice of dhikr in Islamic spirituality and especially Sufism. Mention of God’s Most Beautiful Names is also
found in 20:8; 59:24; and a similar command to call upon them is made in 17:110:

*Say, “Call upon God, or call upon the Compassionate. Whichever you call upon, to Him belong the Most Beautiful Names.”*

God’s Names are described as the *Most Beautiful* (*al-ḥusnā*), a word also related to goodness and virtue, and are said to be beautiful to the ear as well as the heart (*Q*). On the basis of a widely reported *ḥadīth* (see 59:24c), God is traditionally said to have ninety-nine Beautiful Names. While the list of those Names varies slightly in different reports, and several lists contain more than ninety-nine, the Names attributed to God in Islamic tradition are sanctified by the Islamic scripture in that they are based upon or derived from the many terms used to describe Him in the Quran, including those repeated frequently throughout the text such as Compassionate, Merciful, Sovereign, Holy, One, Hearer, Seer, Knower, and Powerful. In some cases, a particular Name of God does not appear in the Quran, but is recognized as a Divine Name on the basis of related Divine actions described in the text.

That God has many Names is not considered to compromise His Oneness or to indicate that He has parts or qualities that would compromise His Oneness; rather, the Names are considered to represent Attributes or Qualities of His undifferentiated Essence, which are differentiated through the Self-manifestation of the Essence and then perceived in the mind of the one who is calling Him by them. They also reveal different Attributes of God, some pertaining to His Essence, and others to the different ways in which He relates to His creation. Nonetheless, each Name is understood to possess a real Divine Presence or Quality, for as al-Ṭabrīsī notes there are no empty titles for God. In fact, in Islamic metaphysics, the whole of the cosmos is considered to be in reality nothing but reflections or theophanies (*tajalliyāt*) of the Divine Names and Qualities.

The discussion of God’s Names and Qualities is a very important issue in Islamic theology, philosophy, and Sufism; and the science of Divine Names (*ʿilm al-asmāʾ*), which includes the science of *al-jafr*—that is, the science of the symbolic numerical significance of the Names and their constituent letters—is among the most important of the esoteric Islamic sciences. Most Islamic thinkers agree that God’s Names are His Attributes (*ṣifāt*), which can be divided into Attributes of Essence (e.g., Knowing, Powerful, Living, Hearing, Seeing, Holy) and Attributes of action (e.g., Creator, Provider, Originator, Forgive, Judge), although there are some differences in traditional sources regarding which Names belong to which category and the extent to which the Divine Attributes are distinct from or identical with the God’s Essence. In Islamic esoterism, God and His Names are considered one. God is understood to be present in His sanctified Names, each of which is a ladder leading to Him.

God’s Names have also been commonly divided into those of Beauty (*jamāl*), such as Compassionate, Merciful, Gentle, Kind, and Pardoner, and those of Majesty
(jalāl), such as Judge, Compeller, Reckoner, and Possessor of Vengeance. Along these same lines, the Names have been also divided into those that could be manifested in human beings (Kind, Generous) and those that belong to God alone (Sovereign, Sublime, Holy; Ṭ). In the Islamic world, human beings are allowed to have as their names those Divine Names that represent qualities that can be manifested in human beings, such as the name Karīm (Generous), but not those that belong to God alone, such as Quddūs (Holy). There are also names belonging to both categories, such as ʿAlī, which can also be used as human names.

Although all of God’s Names can be described as the Most Beautiful (Ṭs), some suggest that here the Most Beautiful Names refers specifically to the Names of Beauty, which believers are encouraged to call upon in seeking God’s Forgiveness and Mercy, to the exclusion of the Names of Majesty or Wrath (Ṭs), which they are generally discouraged from invoking. Others assert that one can call upon God by any Name or description of God found in the Quran; for example, one may address Him as “completer of His Light” (61:8); “the best of plotters” (3:54): or “the fourth of three” (cf. 58:7; Q). God’s supreme Name is Allāh, which is said to encompass all of His other Names (Q). Sufi practitioners of dhikr regularly invoke the Divine Name Allāh, but it is also common for them to repeatedly invoke other Divine Names under the instruction of a shaykh, or spiritual guide, in order to cultivate certain spiritual attitudes or virtues or as antidotes to certain ailments or difficulties existing in the soul (symbolically speaking, to transform the substance of the soul from lead into gold). According to Sufi commentators, behind God’s Names and Attributes mentioned in the Quran are other Attributes that surpass human understanding; the Names thus represent in a sense the limits of our knowledge of God (Aj, ST, Su, Qu), but also gates to His infinite Reality and the forms made available to human beings to acquire knowledge of God without being limited to what is humanly accessible.

Those who deviate with regard to His Names are said to be those who refer to Him using specifically human attributes, such as “father” or “son” (R), those who attribute evil actions or intentions to God, or those who have an anthropomorphic understanding of the Divinity and thus describe Him in terms that are ignorant or unworthy of Him (Ṭs, Z). Several commentators assert that one should not refer to God using any name or description not found in the Quran or the Sunnah, even if it is a synonym for a known Name of God found in these sources (R, Ṭs). Whenever the invocation of God’s Names is done ritually, the Names have to be invoked in Arabic, although in the context of personal supplication, rather than canonical prayer or Sufi dhikr, it is permissible to use non-Arabic references to God, such as Khudā in Persian or “God” in English. To deviate with regard to His Names can also refer to those who use His Names or derivations from them to designate false gods or idols, such as the pagan Makkans who worshipped Allāt, whose name appears to be a feminine form of Allāh (IK, Q, R, Ṭs, Z).
And among those We have created, there is a community that guides by the truth and does justice thereby.

See v. 159, where the same description is applied to a community among the people of Moses. In the present verse the community is widely considered to be a reference specifically to the Islamic community (Ṭ, Ṭs). Some narrow the reference further on the basis of a ḥadīth in which the Prophet says, “Verily among my community is a group who will [live] according to the truth until the return of Jesus, peace be upon him” (R, Ṭs, Z); this group is sometimes identified as the religious scholars or those who call others to Islam (Z), while some Shiite traditions consider it a reference to the Shiite community specifically (Ṭs). More generally, the verse can indicate that God will never leave the world without someone who calls to the truth (Q, R). In Shiite tradition, there is a well-known ḥadīth that says, “The earth will never be left without a Proof of God (ḥujjat Allāh).”

And as for those who deny Our signs, We shall lead them on little by little, whence they know not.

And I will grant them respite; truly My scheme is firm.

See also 68:44–45. That God shall lead them on little by little, or “by degrees,” may refer to the various ways in which God “leads astray” those who disbelieve or do wrong as punishment for their disbelief and wrongdoing, including “granting them respite” (v. 183; see also 13:32; 22:44, 48; 35:8; 68:44–45) or making their wrongdoing “seem fair” to them (3:14; 6:108; 10:12), so that they falsely assume that they enjoy Divine favor and thus continue along this path toward their own punishment (Ṭ). That God “schemes” against the disbelievers and that His scheming is superior to theirs are alluded to in other verses (see 7:99; 10:21; 52:42; 86:15–17); the latter is similar to the idea that God is the best of plotters (see 3:54; 8:30 and commentary) and that unto God belongs plotting altogether (13:42; cf. 14:46); see also 27:50.
Have they not reflected? There is no madness in their companion. He is naught but a clear warner.

Their companion is a reference to the Prophet Muhammad, and the statement that there is no madness in him is a rebuttal to the Makkans’ claims that he was “mad” or, literally, “possessed by jinn” (majnūn); see 15:6; 23:70; 34:8; 37:36; 44:14; 68:51; 81:22. The Quran also assures Muhammad personally that he is not possessed in 52:29 and 68:2. According to one report, the Prophet had been atop the hill of Ṣafā calling to each clan among the Quraysh and warning them of God’s punishment. Someone in the crowd remarked that he seemed possessed, raising his voice in warning all night long. This verse was then revealed in response (IK, R, Ṭ, Z). Al-Rāzī suggests more generally that some Makkans dismissed the Prophet as “possessed,” because his religious practice was so different from their own or because, when revelation came upon him, his physical appearance and demeanor changed dramatically (R). The rhetorical question Have they not reflected? is intended to spur the pagan Makkans to consider the known character and virtue of the Prophet in assessing the truth and soundness of the message he brings; as the Prophet is told to say to his Makkang detractors in 10:16, I tarried among you for a lifetime before it, meaning that they should know well his character. The Prophet is instructed to describe himself as a clear warner in several verses, including 15:89; 22:49; 29:50; 38:70; 46:9; 67:26; Noah also describes himself as a clear warner in 11:25; 26:115; 71:2.

Or have they not contemplated the dominion of the heavens and the earth, and what things God has created, and that their term may already have drawn nigh? So in what discourse after this will they believe?

This is one of several passages where people, and here the Makkans in particular, are asked to consider and reflect upon the wonders of God’s creation as proof of His Reality and Power; see also 14:19; 17:99; 21:30; 22:65; 26:7; 27:86; 29:19; 31:20; 88:17–20. Their term refers to their individual deaths, or to the end of the world and their impending judgment before God (Z), or to both. They should consider that this term may already have drawn nigh, for death and judgment are always imminent. The rhetorical question In what discourse after this—that is, the Quran—will they believe? (cf. 45:6; 77:50) is meant to indicate that it should not
be difficult for them to believe in the clear message of the Quran, conveyed in their own language by a man already known to them as a man of good, sound, and truthful character. According to commentators, the Divine provenance of the Quran should have been obvious to the Makkans, since its language has a literary quality and clarity that none could imitate or challenge (Ṭs; see 2:23; 10:38; 11:13).

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186 Whomsoever God leads astray, no guide has he. And He leaves them to wander confused in their rebellion.

186 Whomsoever God leads astray has no guide, for as the Quran states in 3:73, the only guidance is God’s Guidance; see also 13:33; 39:23, 36; 40:33. That God leaves them to wander confused in their rebellion refers to the respite that God gives disbelievers and wrongdoers in this life, a respite that may allow for their repentance, but may also give them the opportunity to persist in the wrongdoing that assures their punishment (Ṭ); see also 2:15; 6:110; 10:11; 23:76; 27:4.

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187 They question thee about the Hour, when it will set in. Say, “Knowledge thereof lies only with my Lord. None save He shall manifest it at its proper time. Heavy shall it weigh upon the heavens and the earth. It shall not come upon you but suddenly.” They question thee as if thou knew it well. Say, “Knowledge thereof lies only with God, but most of mankind know not.”

187 The Hour refers here and throughout the Quran to the onset of the apocalypse and the final end of the world or eschaton. That knowledge of the Hour lies only with my Lord indicates that the coming of the Hour is among the “unseen” matters known to God alone (Ṭ); regarding His exclusive knowledge of the Hour, see 31:34; 33:63; 41:47; 43:85; 79:42–44. In a well-known hadith, when the Archangel Gabriel questions the Prophet about when the Hour will arrive, he responds, “The one who is questioned knows no more than the questioner” (R). According to some commentators, not knowing when the Hour will arrive, like not
knowing the moment of one’s own death, serves to encourage good deeds and discourage evil ones, since one never knows when one may be called to account (R, Z). That the Hour will come upon people suddenly (cf. 6:31; 12:107; 21:40; 22:55; 43:66; 47:18) indicates that the time of its coming will always remain beyond the knowledge of human beings, even the prophets. This verse has great importance, therefore, for the understanding of Islamic eschatology. Although a number of people have made predictions about the coming of the Hour or even claimed to be the Mahdī, the rightly-guided leader who will set matters right on earth before the final apocalypse, as widely described in the Hadīth, the Quran and the Prophet himself explicitly reject the idea that the Prophet, or indeed anyone but God, had knowledge of when the Hour and the events leading up to it would arrive.

Heavy shall it weigh upon the heavens and the earth may refer to the destructive events associated with the apocalypse as described in the Quran, including the splitting of the heavens (82:1, 84:1), the convulsing of the earth (99:1), the destruction of the mountains (101:5), and the boiling of the seas (81:6; 82:3; R). It may also mean that the coming of the Hour will weigh heavily upon those in the heavens and the earth—that is, upon angels, jinn, and human beings—because the uncertainty about the time of its arrival is difficult for them to bear or because they dread its coming (R, Ṭ, Z).

The Makkans questioned the Prophet about the Hour as if he knew it well, meaning they assumed that the Prophet had acquired knowledge of the coming of the Hour (JJ, Z) and that he welcomed questions about it and was willing to discuss it (Ṭ); moreover, the Prophet’s open and welcoming demeanor gave them confidence that he would disclose this secret matter to them because of their close relationship to him (R, Ṭ, Z). The verse concludes by again asserting God’s exclusive knowledge of the Hour. But regarding this truth as well as other important religious truths, most of mankind know not (cf. 34:28, 36; 45:26).

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Say, “I have no power over what benefit or harm may come to me, save as God wills. Had I knowledge of the unseen, I would have acquired much good, and no evil would have touched me. I am naught save a warner and a bearer of glad tidings unto a people who believe.

188 That the Prophet has no power over benefit or harm to himself or others and that he is as utterly subject to Divine Will as are all other human beings is also found in 10:49 and 72:21–22. Knowledge of the unseen includes knowledge of all
realms of reality that transcend the ordinary ken of human beings, including knowledge of the celestial realm, of the inner intentions, thoughts, and spiritual destiny of others, and of the Hour (v. 187) as well all future events. In this verse, the Prophet argues that if he had access to such knowledge, particularly regarding the future (Ta‘), he could have used it to prevent harm or evil to himself and **acquired much good**, meaning the accumulation of good works (R, Ta‘), although some indicate that, in theory, this could also mean the acquisition of worldly benefits (R, Ta‘, Z). According to one report, some of the Quraysh asked the Prophet if God had informed him about the time of rising and falling prices, that they might benefit from this information in their mercantile activity (R).

The description of Muhammad and other prophets as simply “warners” and “bearers of glad tidings” is repeated throughout the Quran (see, e.g., 2:119, 213; 4:165; 5:19; 6:48; 11:2; 17:105; 18:56; 25:56; 33:45; 34:28; 48:8).

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189 He it is Who created you from a single soul, and made from it its mate, that he might find rest in her. Then, when he covered her, she bore a light burden, and carried it about. But when she had grown heavy, they called upon God, their Lord, “If Thou giveth us a healthy child, we shall surely be among the thankful.”

190 Then, when He gave them a healthy child, they ascribed partners unto Him with regard to that which He had given them. Exalted is God above the partners they ascribe.

189–90 Regarding God’s creation of human beings from a single soul, see 4:1c; 39:6c. In v. 189, as in 4:1, the single soul is commonly identified as Adam and its mate as Eve (JJ, R, Ta‘, Z), although these terms may be used to refer to the generation of human beings from male and female spouses generally. God made its mate that he might find rest in her is similar to the statement in 30:21: And among His signs is that He created mates for you from among yourselves, that you might find rest in them, and He established affection and mercy between you. Thus, among the most important benefits of marriage are the emotional and physical comforts that each spouse provides for the other (see also 2:187), not merely the opportunity for procreation (mentioned in 16:72). To find rest in one’s spouse
means to enjoy love, peace, and intimacy together, which is natural, in a sense, because spouses have been created from a single soul (Z). Al-Zamakhshari maintains that the love for one’s spouse is therefore similar to the love for one’s child, insofar as the love of both derive, to some extent, from the sense that they are part of one’s very being.

Given the commentators’ tendency to gloss the original human soul and its mate (which is also a soul like it), in various Quranic contexts, as references to Adam and Eve, some commentators also interpret the subsequent narrative in vv. 189–90 as pertaining specifically to Adam and Eve. In this interpretation, when Adam covered Eve—that is, had sexual relations with her—Eve bore a light burden, meaning the seed of Adam that she now carried...about inside her. But when she had grown heavy with child, the couple together prayed that the child would be healthy and sound (R, Ṭ, Z). Yet when they were given a sound child, they ascribed partners unto God. Given this spiritually reprehensible response to the blessing they had received, it is difficult to see how this narrative can be said to concern Adam, who is a prophet according to the Islamic tradition. Therefore, some indicate that when the verse turns to the discussion of ascribing partners to God, it is referring not to Adam and Eve, but to their offspring, that is—human beings in general (R, Z)—yet the verb tenses continue to be in the dual. Given all these considerations, it seems most reasonable to understand this narrative as a parable relating to married couples in general and demonstrating the human tendency to beseech God when one feels helpless and afraid, but to attribute good fortune to other natural or supernatural causes after God has answered one’s prayers (R). For similar parables, see, e.g., 6:63–64; 10:22–23; 17:67; 29:65; 30:33; 31:32. The statement that God is exalted...above the partners human beings ascribe to Him is also found in 9:31; 10:18; 16:1, 3.

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191 Do they ascribe as partners those who created naught and are themselves created?

192 Those who can neither help them, nor help themselves?

191–92 These verses contain a common Quranic argument demonstrating the foolishness of worshipping anything other than God. Since God is the only Creator, anything other than Him is itself created (cf. 6:100; 13:16; 16:20; 25:3; 31:11; 35:40; 46:4; 52:35–36). All objects of worship other than God are therefore created beings themselves, ultimately incapable of helping others or even
themselves outside of God’s Will and thus unable to bring benefit or harm to themselves or others; see v. 188 and 10:49, where the Prophet indicates that he too is incapable in this regard, as well as 5:76; 6:71; 10:18; 13:16; 21:43; 36:74–75; 20:88–89; 21:66; 22:12; 25:3, 55; 26:71–73, which relate to all idols and false deities.

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193 And if you call them to guidance, they follow you not. It is the same for you whether you call them or whether you remain silent.

193 If you call them to guidance, meaning if one calls the idols themselves to guidance, they follow you not; that is, they do not respond (JJ, Ṭ, Ṭs). Others suggest this may mean that when one calls upon the idols for guidance, they do not respond to the request (Z). They cannot respond in any way because, as suggested in v. 195, they do not have ears with which they hear; nor do they have faculties of intellect and speech. Alternately, if you call them to guidance may refer to the attempt to call the idolaters, or those who ascribe partners to God (vv. 190–92), to guidance (Ṭs). In either case, because of their inability or unwillingness to respond to this call, it does not matter whether you call them or whether you remain silent (Ṭ). The seeming imperviousness of certain people to guidance and truth is alluded to metaphorically in v. 179, where such people are likened to cattle, and is also mentioned in 2:6 and 36:10.

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194 Truly those whom they call upon apart from God are servants like you. So call upon them! Let them answer you, if you are truthful.

195 Have they feet with which they walk? Have they hands with which they grasp? Have they eyes with which they perceive? Have they ears with which they hear? Say, “Call upon your partners, then scheme against me, and grant me no respite.”
These three verses challenge the idolaters to call upon the idols and false deities they ascribe as partners to God, while mocking these false objects of worship as merely servants like themselves (v. 194), belonging to God and subject to His Sovereignty. Moreover, the capabilities of such idols fall short of those enjoyed even by the human beings who worship them, for as the rhetorical questions in v. 195 remind them, the idols have no feet to walk upon, no hands to grasp, no eyes to perceive, no ears to hear. How, then, the questions imply, can one worship what is less capable than oneself? (IK, Mw). The challenge the Prophet is told to issue at the end of v. 195, scheme against me, and grant me no respite, is that they try their best to thwart God and the mission of His Prophet. This is identical or similar to statements made by Noah and Hūd to their disbelieving peoples; see 10:71; 11:55. See also 77:39, where God challenges the deniers on the Day of Judgment, saying, So if you have a scheme, then scheme against Me! The disbelievers are invited to scheme and grant no respite, but it is understood that their schemes will ultimately fail, for naught in the heavens or upon the earth can thwart God (35:44), while by contrast God’s scheme is firm despite His “granting them respite” (see 7:182–83c).

The Prophet’s invitation to his detractors to scheme against him demonstrates his utter confidence in God’s Succor and Protection (Z), as indicated in the Prophet’s statement in v. 196: Truly my Protector is God. Protector translates Wali, a Divine Name invoked several times in the Quran (e.g., 4:45; 6:127; 42:9, 28; 59:23; 66:4), which in addition to “Protector” also means “Friend.” God protects the righteous, specifically, as He protects the reverent (45:19) and the believers (2:257; 3:68).

And those whom you call upon apart from Him can neither help you, nor help themselves.”

This verse is a reiteration of the statement in vv. 191–92 about the helplessness of idols and false deities; see commentary on these verses. That these false idols cannot even help themselves and are in need of the help of their human adherents is illustrated with irony in 21:68, where the idolaters among Abraham’s people seek to kill Abraham in order to “help their gods.”
If thou callest them unto guidance, they hear not. Thou seest them looking upon thee, but they see not.

Cf. 35:14. According to most commentators, *if thou callest them unto guidance* refers to the attempt to call the idols to guidance (IK, Q, R, Ṭ, Ṭs, Z). The idols have been fashioned to appear as if they have eyes, which are directed toward those in front of them, so that they seem to be *looking upon* those standing before them, but *they see not* (IK, Ṭ, Z). Some commentators mention a minority interpretation indicating that this verse refers to calling the idolaters, rather than the idols, *unto guidance* (IK, Q, R, Ṭs). The ambiguity that allows for the possibility that the verse is describing either the idols or the idolaters makes a strong rhetorical point. Reading this verse in conjunction with v. 179, which describes the idolaters as having eyes, ears, and hearts that do not function so as to allow them to know and be rightly guided, and v. 195, which describes the false idols they worship as without functioning eyes and ears at all, suggests that in worshipping the blind and deaf idols, the idolaters become similarly blind and deaf—or that the idolaters are already blind and deaf; otherwise they would not worship idols. Although the idolaters, unlike the idols themselves, do have physically functional eyes and ears, these faculties have become atrophied and spiritually dysfunctional, effectively making the idolaters as impervious to guidance as the idols themselves.

Take to pardoning, and enjoin right, and turn away from the ignorant.

This is one of many verses encouraging forbearance toward others, including one’s religious opponents or those by whom one has been wronged; see also 2:109; 3:159; 5:13; 23:96–98; 24:22; 41:34–35; 45:14; 64:14. What is meant here is forgiving and excusing people’s failings of character and deed and being gentle rather than harsh. When this verse was revealed, the Prophet reportedly asked the Archangel Gabriel what was meant, and after consulting with God, Gabriel stated that it meant that one should “maintain the ties of kinship with one who would cut himself off from you; give to the one who withholds from you; and pardon the one who wrongs you” (R, Ṭ, Ṭs, Z). The Prophet also reportedly advised his followers, “Be easy; do not be difficult” (Z). *Pardoning* translates ʿafw, which can also mean “a surplus,” and a minority interpretation understands
this verse as commanding the Prophet to collect the surplus wealth of his followers for the purposes of charity prior to the Divine commandment to establish the obligatory alms (zakāh; R, T).

*Enjoin right* is an injunction found in several verses, although in these cases, *right* translates maʿrūf, while here it translates the related term ʿurf, which means what is considered right according to custom or tradition. Both terms connote proper, normative, and honorable behavior (Z; cf. 3:104, 110, 114; 7:157; 9:71, 112; 22:41; 31:17); see 3:104c. *Turn away from the ignorant* means to be patient with foolish or bad behavior, to avert one’s eyes from behavior that is offensive (R), and to leave people alone once one has apprised them of the truth (T), rather than arguing with them or responding to them in kind (Z). See also 4:63; 6:68, 106, 112, 137; 9:95; 15:94; 32:30; 43:83; 51:54; 70:42 for similar injunctions.

This verse thus sums up the attitudes that represent nobility of character (Z). Although some have suggested that verses like this, which counsel forbearance toward idolaters or disbelievers, were abrogated by later Madinan verses that commanded the Prophet to fight his religious opponents, others argue that this is not the case, since an injunction toward gentleness and leniency with one’s religious opponents does not stand in contradiction to the command to fight them when necessary or to claim one’s rights when justified (R, T). As stated in 42:40: *The recompense of an evil is an evil like unto it. Yet, whosoever pardons and sets matters aright, his reward is with God. Truly He loves not the wrongdoers.*

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And should a temptation from Satan provoke thee, seek refuge in God. Truly He is Hearing, Knowing.

200 See also 41:36 for an identical verse. Although the present verse is addressed to the Prophet, the injunction it contains applies to all believers (R). In context, this verse may mean specifically that if one is provoked by a Satanic temptation to respond with anger to the ignorant ones mentioned in v. 199, rather than turning away from them and being patient, one should seek refuge in God (T); however, the application of the injunction is general, as Muslims are always encouraged to seek God’s help against Satanic provocation, given Satan’s threat to mislead human beings (7:16–17; 15:39; 17:62). The formula “I seek refuge in God from the outcast Satan” (Aʿūdhu bi’Llāhi min al-shayṭān al-rajiμ) is frequently uttered in Muslim daily life, not only when one fears evil forces or temptations, but also at the beginning of various ritual or religious acts. For example, when making ablutions, praying, or reciting Quranic verses, one begins by uttering the formula of seeking refuge with God, known as the istiʿādhah, prior to the basmalah, the
Truly those who are reverent, when they are touched by a visitation from Satan, they remember; then behold, they see.

To be touched by a visitation from Satan means to be tempted by him, perhaps in a dream or apparition, which is the lexical meaning of ṭāʾif (Z), translated here as “visitation.” Some consider a visitation from Satan to refer here to the impulse toward anger (Ṭ) or to any Satanic insinuation (“whispering”; see 114:4c) that tempts one toward a moral or intellectual lapse (Ṭ). The reverent, when faced with such a Satanic visitation or temptation of this kind, remember—that is, they remember God, and in particular they remember the commands of God and the threat of His punishment—and so return to obedience (Ṭ). Remember translates tadhakkarū, which can also mean to “reflect” or “take heed.” After remembering, the reverent again see, meaning that they are restored to sound judgment and guidance (Ṭṣ) and return to what is right and what God has commanded (Ṭ). According to al-Zamakhsharī “remembering” God in this way whenever one is tempted is the regular habit of the reverent.

But as for their brethren, they draw them ever further into error, and then they cease not.

Their brethren—that is, the brethren of Satan, or satans (since Satan can be a collective reference to satans as a group)—may be a reference to the ignorant (v. 199) or to the idolaters in general (Ṭṣ); see also 2:14c. Such people, in contrast to the reverent in v. 201, allow themselves to be drawn ever further into error; that is, they are literally helped along in their error by Satanic temptation, until they err continuously, having no fear of God to give them pause (Ṭ). Given the ambiguity of the pronouns in this verse, it may also mean that the satans do not cease in their attempts to lead such people further into error (Ṭ, Ṭṣ).
And when thou bringest them not a sign, they say, “Why do you not choose it?” Say, “I only follow that which is revealed unto me from my Lord. These are insights from your Lord, and a guidance and a mercy for a people who believe.”

The disbelievers’ request for a sign from the prophets who had been sent to them is a theme repeated throughout the Quran; see 6:37c. Here they ask the Prophet, Why do you not choose it? since they assume that the signs or miracles brought by the prophets are matters of their own choosing, and that the Prophet can simply select at will a sign to present to them (T). The response that he is instructed to give, I only follow that which is revealed unto me from my Lord (see also 6:50; 10:15; 46:9), is similar to other statements he makes indicating that whatever power or knowledge he has is limited to what God has given him, for example, that he is simply a warner and bearer of glad tidings (v. 188). With their question, the idolaters may also be asking, “Why have you not received a sign from your Lord?” (T).

These are insights from your Lord refers to the Quranic verses, which are revealed to the Prophet (T, Z). They are further described as a guidance and a mercy. These same three descriptions are given of the Quran (implicitly) in 45:20 and of the Torah in 28:43. Elsewhere, both the Quran and the Torah are described as a guidance and a mercy; see 6:154; 7:52, 154; 10:57; 16:64, 89; 27:77; 31:3. According to Ibn Kathîr, the Prophet’s response to the idolaters’ request for a sign concludes with a reference to the Quran in order to indicate that the Quranic verses themselves are the Prophet’s greatest miracle or “sign.”

And when the Quran is recited, hearken unto it, and listen, that haply you may receive mercy.

The command to both hearken unto and listen to the Quran, employing two words that are nearly synonyms, serves to emphasize the care with which one should listen to the sacred sound of the recited Quran, paying full attention in order to understand its meaning as well as reflecting upon its teachings (Aj, T) and acting according to its prescriptions (Q, Z). Listen translates anšitū, which connotes listening silently, and which some indicate was particularly important when the Prophet was reciting the Quran (Q). This injunction also has specific importance
for the etiquette of communal prayer, requiring all those praying behind the imam to be silent and listen attentively to the Quranic passages that the imam recites, neither engaging in conversation with fellow worshippers nor uttering the recitations themselves (Aj, Ṭ, Ṭs, Z). Some commentators assert that the command to listen attentively to the recited Quran applies to any context in which one hears it (Aj, Q, Z). Listening silently and with pure receptivity to the recited Quran is considered by some as a means of developing the quality of pure servitude toward God (Su) or of coming into the Presence of God, who is the ultimate “Speaker” behind the recited words (Aj). Since the Quran is described in v. 203 as a mercy, one should hearken to its recited words so one may receive mercy. Ibn ʿAjībah states that “mercy is the closest thing to the one listening to the Quran.”

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205 And remember thy Lord within thy soul, humbly and in awe, being not loud of voice, in the morning and the evening, and be not among those who are heedless.

205 The command to remember thy Lord is addressed to the Prophet, but applies to all people (R). It likely refers to both the invocation (dhikr) of God with the tongue and the remembrance (dhikr) of God in the heart—the latter indicated by the call to remember God within thy soul. This “remembrance” may also take the form of reciting the Quran or uttering words of praise and glorification for God as well as the testament to His Oneness (Z). Read in connection with the previous verse, remember thy Lord may be an injunction to remember God when one hears the Quran being recited (Ṭ). To remember God within thy soul may also mean to remember Him “within thyself,” and al-Ṭabarî connects this verse with a famous ḥadîth qudsî (sacred ḥadîth), “When My servant remembers Me in himself, I remember him in Myself; when he remembers Me in solitude, I remember him in solitude; when he remembers Me in an assembly, I remember him in an assembly that is nobler” (Ṭ). The present verse is one of the most important in suggesting the spiritual importance of dhikr (remembrance or invocation), encouraged, particularly by Sufis, as a means of attaining an “unveiling” by which one arrives at a more profound understanding of God (R) and realizes that God is ever near and witness to one’s thoughts and deeds (ST) and indeed as a means of experiencing His Presence and one’s immersion “in the ocean of Divinity.” According to a ḥadîth, “All that is on the earth is accursed save the remembrance of God.” Concerning dhikr, see also 13:28c; 29:45c; 33:41c.

The command to remember God humbly and in awe, being not loud of voice, is similar to the command to call upon Him humbly and in secret (6:63; 7:55) and
can be understood as directions for the performance of *dhikr* in Sufism. Lowering one’s voice is also enjoined during supplicatory prayer (17:110), when speaking in the presence of the Prophet (49:2–3), and as part of one’s general comportment, for the *vilest of voices are those of asses* (31:19). To pray quietly reflects sincerity in one’s prayer (Aj, R, Z), indicating that one is not praying *to be seen of men* (4:142), and is best suited to facilitating reflection and recollection (Z). The Prophet was once asked by some Companions whether God was near, so that they should whisper to Him, or far away, so that they should shout, after which 2:186 was then revealed, *When My servants ask thee about Me, truly I am near. I answer the call of the caller when he calls Me* (IK).

Al-Rāzī explains that the invocation or remembrance enjoined here should be done not silently, but in a voice low enough that it can be heard only by oneself, since there is a profound connection between the body, soul, and spirit—each of which is a door to the others—a connection that is activated by the process of remembering or invoking God. Hearing the invocation uttered by the bodily tongue moves the imagination and soul of the one invoking, which in turn strengthens the remembrance in the spiritual heart. The act of remembrance thus takes place simultaneously on all three levels, each reflecting upon and strengthening the others. Because of the injunction to remember God quietly, some might consider this verse as prohibiting the loud, communal *dhikr* practiced by Sufi groups. Ibn ʿAjībah, however, rejects this interpretation, noting that this verse was revealed in Makkah, when the believers had to be circumspect in their worship, and that when the community migrated to Madinah, the Prophet and Companions would conduct public *dhikr* sessions in the mosque.

*The morning and the evening* are mentioned here and elsewhere as times particularly suited to remembering, supplicating, or praising God (see 3:41; 6:52; 18:28; 19:11; 24:36; 33:41–42; 48:9; 76:25). These two times of day may also be mentioned as a way of saying that one should remember and praise God at all times (Aj, Z). These two times, marking the beginning and end of the day, are mentioned specifically because of the spiritual symbolism they entail—each being a time of transition between light and darkness, sleeping and waking, and thus suggestive of death and resurrection (Aj, R).

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Surely those who are with thy Lord are not too arrogant to worship Him. And they glorify Him, and prostrate unto Him.

206 *Those who are with thy Lord* are understood to be the angels, who are
“with” Him in the sense of being near to His Mercy and Bounty (R, Z). The implication of this verse is that if the angels, with their spiritual purity and nearness to God, are not too arrogant to worship Him, how can it be that human beings, with their spiritual imperfections and distance from God, are reluctant to worship Him? (R). See also 4:172, where neither the messiah (Jesus) nor the angels would disdain to be a servant, or “worshipper,” of God. The angels’ constant praise and glorification of God is mentioned in several places in the Quran (see, e.g., 13:13; 39:75; 42:5). That they prostrate unto Him is also mentioned in 16:49. Because this verse includes a reference to prostrating, this is one of fifteen verses known as sajdah (prostration) verses; see 19:58c. These verses are noted as such in official Arabic texts of the Quran, indicating that Muslims should physically prostrate upon reciting them or hearing them recited although this is not required by Islamic law.