The Ascending Ways

*al-Ma'ārij*

Taking its name from the *ascending ways* mentioned in v. 3, *al-Ma'ārij* is from the middle Makkan period. It is also known as *al-Mawāqi‘*, which in this context indicates “Those Matters That Are Impending,” as taken from the reference to *an impending punishment* in v. 1. Another of its titles is *Sa’ala*, “Someone Asked,” which is taken from the first word of the *sūrah*. Some say it was revealed immediately after the preceding *sūrah* and can be seen as continuing the description of the Resurrection and the Fire in 69:18–37 (Āl).

The *sūrah* begins with a rebuke to those who ask mockingly about or even seek to hasten the Day of Judgment (vv. 1–7), followed by a description of that Day and how it will appear to those who did not believe in it and prepare for it (vv. 8–18). This is followed by three famous verses that speak of the anxious and fretful nature of human beings (vv. 19–21). The next passage describes how one can overcome this nature, listing eight responsibilities of being a Muslim (vv. 22–35). The final section (vv. 36–44) then speaks of those who reject these responsibilities and continue to deride the Prophet, having no real understanding of the message with which he was sent.

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

1 A questioner asked about an impending punishment 2
upon the disbelievers which none can avert, from God, Lord of the ascending ways. Unto Him ascend the angels and the Spirit on a day whose measure is fifty thousand years. So be patient with beautiful patience. Truly they see it as far off, but We see it as nigh. On a day when the sky is as molten lead, and the mountains are as carded wool, and no loyal friend shall ask about a loyal friend, [though] they will be made to see them. The guilty would wish to ransom himself from the punishment of that Day at the price of his children, his spouse, and his brother, his kin who had sheltered him, and all who are on the earth, that it might save him. Nay, but it is a churning fire, ripping away the scalp, calling to those who turned their backs and fled, who amassed and hoarded. Truly man was created anxious; when evil befalls him, fretful; and when good befalls him, begrudging, save those who perform prayer, who are constant in their prayers, and in whose wealth is an acknowledged due for the beggar and the deprived, those who affirm the Day of Judgment, and who are wary of the punishment of their Lord— truly there is no security from the punishment of their Lord, those who guard their private parts, save from their spouses or those whom their right hands possess, for then they are not blameworthy; but whosoever seeks beyond that, they are the transgressors; those who abide by their trusts and their pact, who uphold their testimony, and who are mindful of their prayers, those shall be in Gardens, honored. So how is it that those who disbelieve
scramble toward thee from the right and from the left in droves? Does every man among them desire to be admitted into a Garden of bliss? Nay! Truly We created them from that which they know. So I swear by the Lord of the easts and the wests that We are able to replace [them] with what is better than them; and none outstrips Us. So leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they meet the Day that they are promised, a day when they come forth from their graves, hastening as if racing to a goal, their eyes humbled, abasement shall overcome them. That is the Day they have been promised.

**Commentary**

1 A questioner asked about an impending punishment upon the disbelievers which none can avert,

1–2 The translation of v. 1 is based upon reading the preposition bi to mean about rather than “for,” meaning that someone asked the Prophet who would be punished and when (Q, T). Many commentators, however, read the verse “a supplicator supplicated for” or “a petitioner petitioned for.” In this sense, the verse would be similar to 22:47: They bid thee to hasten the punishment, which is said to have been revealed with regard to a certain Nadr ibn al-Ḥārith, who said, O God, if this be the truth from Thee, rain down stones upon us from the sky, or bring us a painful punishment (8:32; IK, JJ, Q); regarding those who seek to hasten the punishment, see 10:50–51; 16:1; 26:204–7; 29:53–54; 34:30; 37:176–77; 42:18; 51:14, 59. In seeking to hasten punishment, Nadr ibn al-Ḥārith is believed to have supplicated against himself and to have unknowingly requested the punishment he received at the Battle of Badr (2/624), when he was killed in captivity (W, Z). According to others, the verse was revealed in response to another of the Prophet’s adversaries among the Quraysh, Abū Jahl (Q).
from God, Lord of the ascending ways.

Ascending ways is understood to be the paths by which one ascends to Heaven (IK), and the verse indicates that none but God can determine who may or may not ascend. Ascending ways can also represent the degrees of favor and blessing that God bestows upon human beings (Q).

Unto Him ascend the angels and the Spirit on a day whose measure is fifty thousand years.

Most commentators interpret the Spirit as a reference to the Archangel Gabriel (IK, Q, Ṭ), who is referred to as the Trustworthy Spirit in 26:193. It may also refer to another angel or to the spirit of a dead person when the spirit is taken from the body (Q); regarding the many different interpretations of “spirit” (rūḥ), see 78:38c. A day whose measure is fifty thousand years is understood to be the Day of Resurrection, which will be as fifty thousand years for the disbelievers (IK, Q). When asked about the length of the Day of Resurrection, the Prophet is reported to have said, “He will lighten it for the believer so that it seems to him like less time than it took for him to perform the obligatory prayer in the life of this world” (IK, Q, Sy). Others say that fifty thousand refers to the distance between Heaven and earth (Q). The disparity between time in the Divine or spiritual realm and time in this world is indicated in several places in the Quran (see, e.g., 22:47; 32:5; 97:3).

So be patient with beautiful patience.

This verse, which echoes the words of the prophet Jacob, Beautiful patience! (12:18, 83), is addressed to the Prophet Muhammad, enjoining him to be patient with those who ask questions such as the one posed in vv. 1–4 (Aj), though it can also be seen as an exhortation to all believers to be patient when confronted with the disbelief of others or even as a response to the questioners who would seek to hasten the coming of the Hour. According to some commentators, the instruction to be patient with disbelievers was abrogated by later verses that instructed the Muslims to fight (JJ, Q), while others maintain that the command to be patient holds at all times in all situations (Ṭ) or that this verse is definitive.
(muḥkam) at all times and therefore is not abrogated (Aj). For the majority of scholars, abrogation only applies to specific legal rulings, not general principles; see 2:106c.

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6 Truly they see it as far off,

6 *It* refers to the Hour, the Day of Judgment, or the punishment. *Far off* indicates that the disbelievers think it is impossible (Aj) or far away enough that they need not be concerned about it.

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7 but We see it as nigh.

7 *We* is taken by most commentators to indicate God speaking in the first-person plural (Ṭ), while others allow that it could indicate the believers (IK), who fear the Day of Judgment as if it were at hand.

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8 On a day when the sky is as molten lead,

8 *Molten lead* translates *muhl*, which some understand as referring to the dirty residue of boiled oil (IK, Ṭ), or oozing blood, or pus (Q). Elsewhere the food that sinners are given to eat in Hell is said to be *like molten lead boiling in their bellies* (44:45).

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9 and the mountains are as carded wool,

9 This verse is repeated in 101:5. Elsewhere it is said that the *mountains are scattered* (77:10), for the Day of Judgment is a day when *the mountains will be like heaps of shifting sand* (73:14); for other verses that speak of the crumbling of mountains, see 18:47; 19:90; 20:105–6; 27:88; 52:10; 81:3.

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and no loyal friend shall ask about a loyal friend,

[though] they will be made to see them. The guilty would wish to ransom himself from the punishment of that Day at the price of his children,

10–11 The Day of Judgment and the Resurrection will be so overwhelming that people will have no concern for anyone except themselves, even for their most loyal companions in earthly life, as in 80:37: For every man that Day his affair shall suffice him (Q, T); see also 23:101; 31:33; 35:18. They will be made to see them is taken to mean that, although they will ask about no one else, all human beings will see one another (T). It may also mean that God shows the believers the state of the disbelievers (T) or that God shows the angels the states of all human beings (Q).

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his spouse, and his brother,

his kin who had sheltered him,

and all who are on the earth, that it might save him.

11–14 That the guilty, or elsewhere those who work evil (39:47), will seek to ransom themselves on the Day of Judgment is stated in several verses. Although this pericope provides a particularly visceral image, in which one seeks to ransom himself with all that is most dear, other verses declare, An earth full of gold would not be accepted from any one of them, were he to offer it in ransom (3:91); and Were they to possess all that is on the earth and the like of it besides, they would seek to ransom themselves thereby (13:18); see also 2:48, 123; 10:54; 57:15. Kin (faṣīlah) in v. 13 may also denote one’s tribe (IK, T) or more specifically one’s mother (IK, Q).

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Nay, but it is a churning fire,
15 Nay denies the possibility of ransom mentioned in the previous verses. Alternately, the verse could be translated, “Truly it is a churning fire” (Q). Churning fire translates laẓā, which is considered one of the names of Hell because it churns its flames (talalazzā; JJ).

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16 ripping away the scalp,

16 Ripping away the scalp means burning away the scalp completely (IK, Ţ), burning away all of one’s skin (Ţ), or burning away everything except one part, which is variously identified as the bones, fingertips, or the facial features, among body parts (IK). It is also taken by ḥasan al-Baṣrī to mean that the entire body will be burned away and only the heart will remain, and it will cry out (IK, Ţ).

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17 calling to those who turned their backs and fled,

17 The Fire will summon those who are destined for it, because during the life of this world they turned away from obedience to God and fled from belief in God’s books and God’s messengers or from the truth (Ţ). Then the Fire will pick out those who turned their backs and fled from the truth in the life of this world (IK).

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18 who amassed and hoarded.

18 For a similar verse see 104:1–2: Woe unto every slandering backbiter who amasses wealth and tallies it. Both passages point to those who refuse to pay the obligatory alms (zakāh). The punishment for hoarding is described most vividly in 9:34–35: [As for] those who hoard gold and silver and spend it not in the way of God, give them tidings of a painful punishment, on the Day when it will be heated in the Fire of Hell, and their foreheads, their sides, and their backs will be branded with it. “This is what you hoarded up for yourselves; so taste that which you hoarded.”
19 Truly man was created anxious;

19–21 The message in these verses is similar to that of 41:49–51: Man wearies not of supplicating for good, and if evil befalls him, he is despondent, despairing. And if We make him taste some mercy from Us after hardship has befallen him, surely he will say, “This is mine; I think not that the Hour will come. If I am returned unto my Lord, surely with Him shall I have that which is most beautiful.” . . . And when We bless man, he turns away and withdraws. Yet when evil befalls him, he is full of prolonged supplication. In both instances, man (insān) refers to human beings in general or, according to some, disbelievers in particular (Q, T).

19 This verse is similar to 21:37, Man was created of haste, and 17:11, Man is ever hasty. Each of these verses can be taken to refer to all human beings, though some interpret them as describing disbelievers in particular (Q, R). In this sūrah, the exception save those who perform prayer (v. 22) suggests that the broader interpretation is intended (R, Z). Anxious translates hulūʾ, which denotes greed and covetousness combined with severe anxiety (Q).

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20 when evil befalls him, fretful;

21 and when good befalls him, begrudging,

20–21 In this context evil and good can be understood as any form of misfortune or good fortune, respectively, or more specifically illness and poverty, on the one hand, and health and wealth, on the other (R). Fretful translates jazūʾ, which indicates both distress regarding one’s misfortune and a lack of forbearance. It is thus the opposite of the patience and forbearance enjoined in v. 5. According to al-Rāzī, to overcome the fret and anxiety described in vv. 19–20, one should realize that the circumstances that give rise to them are from God and be content with them, as one must be content with all that comes from God. Then when health and wealth are present, they should be expended for the sake of seeking gain in the Hereafter rather than gain in this life. Those characterized by the eight qualities mentioned in the following verses (vv. 22–35) are then not subject to the blameworthy state mentioned in these verses (R). Those are begrudging who, when provided with wealth, fail to acknowledge the right that God and others have to it and thus fail to expend any of it in charity (IK, JJ).
save those who perform prayer,

22–35 Similar to 23:1–11, which adds and who turn away from idle talk (23:3) to the list, this pericope is among the most thorough in listing the moral and ritual responsibilities of Islam; see also 33:35.

who are constant in their prayers,

22–23 The first of the ritual responsibilities of Islam is prayer. These verses can be taken to mean those who perform the rites as prescribed without neglecting any aspect, as in v. 34, those who are mindful of their prayers, or simply as those who pray all five daily prayers (Ṭ). It may also indicate those who maintain the prayer of the heart at all times (Aj).

and in whose wealth is an acknowledged due

24–25 These verses are repeated almost verbatim in 51:19. The second responsibility for Muslims is recognizing the rights of the other in regard to one’s wealth. An acknowledged due refers to the obligatory alms (zakāh) rather than supererogatory charity (Ṣadaqah; Q, R, T), though some maintain that it indicates charitable giving beyond the obligatory alms as well (R, T). The beggar refers to those who request, while the deprived may refer to those who have need but do not ask (R); for other meanings of the deprived, see 51:19c. For a list of those who have an acknowledged due, or the right, to a share of one’s wealth, see 2:177.

those who affirm the Day of Judgment,

26 The third responsibility is belief in the Resurrection and the weighing of
deeds and therefore leading a life focused on the Hereafter rather than this world.

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27 and who are wary of the punishment of their Lord—

28 truly there is no security from the punishment of their Lord,

27–28 To be wary of the punishment could be considered an extension of the third responsibility or as a fourth responsibility, since, in addition to believing in the Day of Judgment and what is to follow, believers must also fear the consequences of neglecting duties or committing acts of disobedience, as in 67:12: Truly for those who fear their Lord unseen there shall be forgiveness and a great reward (see also 13:21; 16:50; 21:49; 39:23; 98:8). There is no security from the punishment, because it is inescapable (25:65).

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29 those who guard their private parts,

30 save from their spouses or those whom their right hands possess, for then they are not blameworthy;

31 but whosoever seeks beyond that, they are the transgressors;

29–31 The fifth responsibility is refraining from illicit sexual activity. These three verses are repeated verbatim in 23:5–7. For a more extensive discussion of what it means to guard one’s private parts, see commentary on 24:30–31. According to a hadīth, “Whosoever is able to guarantee what is between his jawbones and what is between his legs, I will guarantee him Paradise.” Another hadīth cites the spread of illicit sexual intercourse as one of the signs of the end of time. Whom their right hands possess refers to slave women with whom one has sexual relations; see 4:3c; 4:25c.
those who abide by their trusts and their pact,

who uphold their testimony,

32–33 The sixth responsibility is to remain true to one’s commitments, both in relation to God, with whom all of humanity is said to have made an initial pretemporal covenant or pact (see 7:172c), and with people (see also 23:8), thus in both religion and the affairs of this world (JJ). The seventh responsibility, which follows from maintaining trusts, is to testify to God’s Oneness and to the other articles of faith (Q), though some say this verse indicates testifying to God’s edicts and remaining true to them (R). It can also be related to testifying to the truth in all matters, even if it is against one’s kin, as in 6:152: And when you speak, be just, even if it be [against] a kinsman. This issue is addressed more fully in 2:283 and 4:135. According to a hadith, “The signs of the hypocrite are three: when he speaks he lies; when he makes a promise, he breaks [it]; and when he is entrusted, he betrays” (IK).

and who are mindful of their prayers,

34 The eighth responsibility is to be among those who are mindful of their prayers (cf. 6:92; 23:9), which is interpreted to mean those who are careful to pray at the right time and to maintain all of the necessary and recommended aspects of prayer (IK), including being mindful and present when praying. The manner in which this extended pericope on the responsibilities of Islam begins with prayer in vv. 22–23 and ends with prayer in this verse indicates the centrality of prayer to all other religious acts. In this vein the Prophet said, “Establish [the prayer] and do not fall short. And know that the best of your deeds is prayer,” meaning for failing to pray. From one perspective, those who are constant in their prayers (v. 23) refers to those who always observe the appointed times for prayer, while those who are mindful of their prayers indicates those who remain focused upon every aspect of prayer, from correct time and direction, to the prescribed purification procedures and location, to the proper attitude (being completely present in prayer by ridding the heart of all distractions and avoiding any acts of disobedience; R on 70:23). Elsewhere the Quran enjoins, Be mindful of your prayers (2:238).
those shall be in Gardens, honored.

This promise is similar to that given at the end of the almost identical pericope in 23:10–11: *It is they who are the heirs, who shall inherit Paradise, abiding therein.*

So how is it that those who disbelieve scramble toward thee from the right and from the left in droves?

Does every man among them desire to be admitted into a Garden of bliss?

It is reported that these verses were revealed in relation to the disbelievers who gathered around the Prophet to listen to him, but derived no benefit from it. Instead, they would deny him and mock him, saying, “If these were to enter Paradise, we would certainly enter it before them, and we will have more wealth therein than they would ever have” (R, W). Others say that these verses refer to a group of hypocrites who would mock the Prophet (Q, R).

Nay! Truly We created them from that which they know.

*Nay! is meant as a negation of the disbelievers’ expectation that they will enter the Garden (v. 38). That which they know refers to the dust and then the drop (35:11) from which God created human beings, of which 77:20 says, Did We not create you from a base fluid? (see also 86:5–7). In this context the reference to the mean substance from which human beings were created indicates that mere existence, which in and of itself is nothing without God, is not enough to merit the rewards of which God and His Prophet speak, as people cannot expect to enter the Garden without being reverent (JJ) or following the responsibilities outlined in vv.*
22–34.

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40 So I swear by the Lord of the easts and the wests that We are able

40 The easts, translating mashāriq, could also mean “the places from which the sun rises,” as the rising of the sun, sharaqa, derives from the same root, sh-r-q, as “east,” mashriq. The wests, translating maghārib, could also mean “the places in which the sun sets,” as the setting of the sun, gharaba, derives from the same root, gh-r-b, as “west,” maghrib. So the verse could be read as a reference to the sun, the moon, and the planets, as each has a different place where it sets and rises. If limited to the sun, this verse can also be understood as a reference to the succession of points on the horizon where the sun rises and where it sets throughout the year and thus to the whole of the horizon. Some also say that it refers to both the sun and the moon (Ṭ). It could also mean what is east of every location and what is west of every location and thus to the whole of the known world; see also 55:17c.

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41 to replace [them] with what is better than them; and none outstrips Us.

41 This verse means either that God is able to give them new bodies in the Hereafter (IK) or that He can replace them with another people in this world (Ṭ), as in 47:38: And if you turn away, He will cause a people other than you to take your place, and they will not be the likes of you; see also 5:54; 36:81–82; 46:33; 56:60–61.

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42 So leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they meet the Day that they are promised,

42 This verse is repeated verbatim in 43:83, and both are reflected in the injunction of 6:91: Say, “Allāh,” then leave them to play at their vain discourse. Elsewhere those who indulge in idle talk or vain discourse are said to be in the
Fire (52:11–13; 74:45–46). In general the missteps of the tongue are considered to be among those deeds that lead most quickly to the Fire; thus 50:18 warns, *No word does he utter without a ready watcher beside him,* and the Prophet advises, “Let whosoever believes in God and in the Last Day either speak well or be silent.” According to some commentators, the injunction to leave those who derided the Prophet to their own devices was abrogated by 9:5 (Q), though most commentators do not maintain that it is abrogated.

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**a day when they come forth from their graves, hastening as if racing to a goal,**

43 The Day of Resurrection is *when the earth is stretched out, and casts forth what is in it, emptying itself* (84:3–4; see also 99:2), and people are ripped from their graves unawares: *with their eyes humbled they emerge from the graves as if they were scattered locusts* (54:7; see also 101:4).

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**their eyes humbled, abasement shall overcome them.** That is the Day they have been promised.

44 Abasement and humiliation are commonly referred to as the consequences of disbelief: *Truly those who oppose God and His Messenger shall be abased, just as those before them were abased* (58:5; see also 58:20). *Their eyes humbled, abasement shall overcome them* (cf. 68:43) thus indicates their utter shame in the Hereafter, as in 10:27: *And as for those who commit evil deeds, the recompense of an evil is one like it, and abasement shall overcome them.*