He Frowned

ʿAbasa

ʿAbasa is an early Makkāni sūrah that takes its name from the first sūrah’s word. It is also known as al-Ṣākhkhah, “The Piercing Cry,” in reference to v. 33, or as al-Safrah, “The Scribes,” in reference to v. 15 (Āl). Some maintain that it is related to the previous sūrah by the manner in which the first ten verses reinforce the message of 79:45, Thou art but a warner for whosoever fears it (Āl), counseling the Prophet not to spend his time seeking to guide those who are indifferent, when there are those waiting who wish to be guided. These first ten verses refer to a famous incident in the early history of Islam. Āʾishah, the wife of the Prophet, reported that this sūrah was revealed about ʿAbd Allāh ibn Umm Maktūm, a blind man, who went to the Prophet and kept saying, “O Messenger of God, guide me,” while the Prophet was speaking to the leaders of the idolaters. The Prophet frowned and kept avoiding him, turning to the others (IK, Q). The verses are then said to have been revealed as a rebuke to the Prophet for preaching to those who had no interest in God’s message, while turning away from one who sought guidance.

ʿAbd Allāh ibn Umm Maktūm was among the first to embrace Islam. He is known for his devotion to the Prophet and the Quran. After the revelation of this sūrah, it is said that the Prophet would greet him by saying, “Welcome to him on whose account my Lord rebuked me” (Q). Ibn Umm Maktūm was one of the first two people to migrate to Madinah, where he taught the Quran to many people. Along with Bilāl ibn Rabāḥ al-Ḥabashī (d. ca. 20/642), Ibn Umm Maktūm would give the call to prayer (adhān) in...
In later years, the Prophet would at times leave Madinah in his care when he left the city. It is also said that 4:95 was revealed regarding the particular case of Ibn Umm Maktūm, who was excused from going on military expeditions on account of his blindness. Nonetheless, he was not content with staying behind when an expedition was in progress and determined that no campaign should pass him by. He requested a role on the battlefield, saying, “Place me between two rows and give me the standard. I will carry it for you and protect it, for I am blind and cannot run away.” After the Battle of Qādisiyyah in 14/636, he was found dead on the battlefield still clutching the standard of the Muslims (Q).

After the verses addressing the case of Ibn Umm Maktūm (vv. 1–10), the sūrah alludes to a book written by the angels (vv. 11–16). It then transitions into a discussion of humanity’s ingratitude (vv. 17–22), followed by enjoinders to recall the bounties provided by God (vv. 23–32) and concluding with a reminder of the disparate ends of believers and disbelievers on the Day of Judgment (vv. 33–42).

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

1 He frowned and turned away, 2 because the blind man came to him. 3 And what would apprise thee? Perhaps he would purify himself, 4 or be reminded, such that the reminder might benefit him. 5 As for him who deems himself beyond need, 6 to him dost thou attend, 7 though thou art not answerable, should he not be purified. 8 But as for him who came to thee striving earnestly 9 while fearful, 10 from him thou art diverted. 11 Nay! Truly it is a reminder— 12 so let whomsoever will, remember it— 13 on pages honored, 14 exalted and purified, 15 in the hands of scribes, 16 noble and pious. 17 May man perish! How ungrateful is he! 18 From what thing did He
create him? From a drop He created him, then proportioned him, then He made the way easy for him. Then He caused him to die and buried him. Then, when He willed, He resurrected him. Nay! But he has not accomplished what He commanded him. So let man consider his food, that We pour down water in abundance; then We split the earth in fissures, and cause grains to grow therein, and vines and herbs, and olives and date palms, and gardens densely planted, and fruit and pastures, as sustenance for you and for your flocks. So when the Piercing Cry does come, that Day when a man will flee from his brother, and his mother and his father, and his spouse and his children. For every man that Day his affair shall suffice him. Faces that Day shall be shining, radiant, laughing, joyous. And faces that Day shall be covered with dust, overspread with darkness. Those, they are the disbelievers, the profligates.

Commentary

1 He frowned and turned away,

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7. though thou art not answerable, should he not be purified.

8. But as for him who came to thee striving earnestly

9. while fearful,

10. from him thou art diverted.

1–10 For the occasion of revelation, see the introduction to the sūrah. The Prophet is here admonished for turning away from one who sought guidance to others whom he hoped to attract to Islam, since he was not responsible for making people accept religion, only for conveying God’s message and guiding those who accepted it, as in 28:56: Surely thou dost not guide whomsoever thou lovest, but God guides whomsoever He will. And He knows best those who are rightly guided. Other verses tell the Prophet to be patient and not turn away from those who seek religion, such as 6:52: And drive not away those who call upon their Lord morning and evening, desiring His Face; and 18:28: Make thy soul patient with those who call upon their Lord morning and evening, desiring His Face. Turn not thine eyes away from them, desiring the adornment of the life of this world, nor obeying one whose heart We have made heedless of the remembrance of Us and who follows his caprice and whose affair exceeds the bounds.

Beyond need (v. 5) translates man istaghnā, which literally means “is self-sufficient” and connotes a view of oneself as “self-sufficient” vis-à-vis God. The fear mentioned in v. 9 is fear of God and the Day of Judgment.

Nay! Truly it is a reminder—
11 Cf. 74:54. It can be taken as a reference to the Quran, this particular sūrah, or the exhortation to treat people equitably (IK, T). The verse also indicates that it is only incumbent upon the Prophet to convey God’s message and remind others, not to sway those who oppose the message (see 88:21–24). For the Quran as Reminder, see 36:69c.

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12 so let whomsoever will, remember it—

12 This verse could also be translated, “So let whomsoever He wills remember it,” meaning that only those whom God wills will be receptive to the revelation and thus remember (Q), for as 11:114 says of the Quran, *This is a reminder for those who remember*. In either reading, *remember it* could also be rendered “remember Him,” meaning “remember God” (IK). This latter reading may be more accurate, as the pronoun taken as a reference to the Quran or the sūrah in v. 11 is feminine, while the pronoun rendered “it” or “Him” in v. 12 is masculine.

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13 on pages honored,

13 According to some, *pages* refers only to the Quran. According to others, it refers to the books of all the prophets (Q) or to the *Preserved Tablet* (85:22; T), which is said to be the source of all revelation. *Pages* translates ʿuḥuf in accordance with the first interpretation. ʿUḥuf is also rendered *scriptures* in 53:36 and 87:18–19, where it refers to the revelations given to Abraham and Moses. They are *honored* or “ennobled” because of what they contain.

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14 exalted and purified,

14 *Exalted* means “elevated” in the Eyes of God (Aj) and beyond all obscurity and contradiction (Q). *Purified* means free from any additions or deficiencies (IK) and protected from being assailed by disbelievers (Q), such that *None touch it, save those made pure* (56:79).

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in the hands of scribes,

noble and pious.

15–16 Scribes translates safarah, which can be understood as a reference to the attendant angels who “inscribe” (safara) the deeds of God’s servants in books (asfār; see 43:80; 50:17–18; 82:10–12), or as a reference to the angels whom God has appointed as “mediators” (sufarāʾ) between Himself and His messengers (Q. Ṭ). A famous ḥadīth states, “One who recites the Quran proficiently and has memorized it is with the scribes, noble and pious” (IK). Some argue that here scribes should be “mediators” to indicate the function of mediating God’s message that human beings can fulfill for other human beings (Q). Safara can also mean “to unveil”; thus some take it as an allusion to the Quran’s making matters clear (Q). Others say that the hands of scribes refers to the reciters of the Quran (Ṭ).

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17 May man perish! How ungrateful is he!

17 May man perish translates qutila al-insān, which could also be rendered, “May man be cursed” (IK, Q). Here the phrase is said to refer to those who deny the truth without any supporting argument, but only because they lack knowledge of it and think it is far-fetched (IK). Ungrateful translates afkara, which indicates both ingratitude toward and disbelief in God (for the broader meaning of kufr, or “disbelief,” see 2:85–86c). Thus this verse could also be read, “Man is accursed for what he disbelieves,” or “Mankind is accursed; for what does he disbelieve?” (Q). According to some, this verse relates to a specific individual who had accepted Islam, but apostatized when Sūrah 53 was revealed; so God revealed this verse, meaning that he was accursed for disbelieving in the Quran after first believing (Q).

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18 From what thing did He create him?

19 From a drop He created him, then proportioned him,

18–19 This is one of several passages in which the creation of the human
being from a drop is cited as evidence of God’s Omnipotence, as in 18:37: *Do you disbelieve in the One Who created you from dust, then from a drop, then fashioned you as a man?* See also 16:4; 40:67; 86:6–8.

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20 then He made the way easy for him.

20 From one perspective, this verse refers to the ease with which a baby comes forth from the mother’s womb (IK, Q); from another, it refers to God’s providing all people with guidance, as in 76:3: *Truly We guided him upon the way, be he grateful or ungrateful* (IK). Some interpret it as an indication that God has made it easy for everything to perform the function for which it was created, as in a famous ḥadīth, “Work, for that for which each person was created has been made easy for him” (Q).

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21 Then He caused him to die and buried him.

22 Then, when He willed, He resurrected him.

21–22 These verses are related to several passages that speak of all the phases of human existence to rebuke those who do not believe in God; e.g., 2:28: *How can you disbelieve in God, seeing that you were dead and He gave you life; then He causes you to die; then He gives you life; then unto Him shall you be returned?*

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23 Nay! But he has not accomplished what He commanded him.

23 *Nay!* is a rebuke to the disbelievers, who, when informed of the Resurrection, will say, . . . “*If I am returned unto my Lord, surely with Him shall I have that which is most beautiful*” (41:50; Q); or it is a rebuke to those who believe that they have accomplished what they were commanded, but, as they disbelieve in God and His Messenger, have not done so (Q). The emphatic particle
kallā (nay) can also be read in the affirmative, in which case the verse would begin, “Truly, he has not . . .” (Q), and would not convey the same sense of rebuke.

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24 So let man consider his food,

24 Consider his food is taken by some to indicate another of the many signs upon which human beings should reflect in order to appreciate fully God’s Power and Mercy (Q). Others say that it relates to reflecting upon the consumption and elimination of food, for that is an example of what becomes of the world (Q).

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25 that We pour down water in abundance;

25 Water is mentioned as a symbol of God’s Mercy in several verses and can also be taken as an allusion to all living things, for God made every living thing from water (21:30; see also 24:45; 25:54).

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26 then We split the earth in fissures,

26 Vegetation comes through the fissures, splitting the earth. For other verses describing the manner in which God brings forth vegetation and revives the earth with water, see, e.g., 6:99; 29:63; 30:24; 31:10; 35:27; 39:21; 41:39.

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27 and cause grains to grow therein,

28 and vines and herbs,

29 and olives and date palms,

30 and gardens densely planted,
and fruit and pastures,
as sustenance for you and for your flocks.

27–32 These verses reflect the continuous Quranic emphasis on the benefits that God has provided through the natural world and the fact that reflecting upon them leads to a deeper understanding of God’s wisdom, since God created the heavens and the earth in truth (14:19; see also 6:73), and whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is on the earth glorifies God (59:1; 61:1; 62:1; 64:1; cf. 57:1; 59:24); for the importance of the natural environment and the connection between creation and revelation, see 3:191c; 45:3c. As sustenance for you and for your flocks also appears in 79:33.

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So when the Piercing Cry does come,

33 The Piercing Cry refers to the second blast from the trumpet of the Archangel Seraphiel, at which all human beings will be resurrected (Q; see 39:68c). It is said that it will almost deafen those who hear it (Bg, IK). Others say that al-ṣākhkhah, translated the Piercing Cry, is a proper name for the Day of Judgment (IK).

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that Day when a man will flee from his brother,
and his mother and his father,
and his spouse and his children.

For every man that Day his affair shall suffice him.

34–37 The terror of the Day of Judgment will be so severe that people will not be concerned with anything other than themselves. In 70:11–14 it is said that a man would go so far as 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. In a famous hadīth, the Prophet said, “People will be gathered barefoot, naked, and uncircumcised.” To which a woman responded, “Will we look upon each other’s nakedness?” He responded, “For every man that Day his affair shall suffice him” (IK, Q).

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38 Faces that Day shall be shining, radiant,

39 laughing, joyous.

38–39 Cf. 75:22. These verses describe the hearts of believers, for “the face is the mirror of the heart” (Ṭb), which are then contrasted with the hearts of disbelievers in vv. 40–41. The faces of believers are shining, radiant from the joy they experience in their hearts and the glad tidings manifest on their faces (IK), because of the ablutions they performed in this life (Q, R), their performance of night vigil (Q, R), or their relief from the burdens and attachments of this world (R). The believers are joyous when they receive their reward from God (Q). Related to the event that is said to have occasioned the revelation of this sūrah (see the introduction to the sūrah), these verses can be seen as a reference to the state of Ibn Umm Maktūm, while vv. 40–42 refer to the state of him who deems himself beyond need (v. 5).

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40 And faces that Day shall be covered with dust,

41 overspread with darkness.

42 Those, they are the disbelievers, the profligates.

40–42 Covered with dust indicates complete and utter humiliation. According to some, the disbelievers, the profligates indicates the same group; disbelief defines their thoughts, and profligacy their actions (Āl, Ṭb); the punishment for disbelief is faces covered with dust, and the punishment for profligacy is being overspread with darkness (Āl); cf. 75:24.