Most commentators consider *al-Balad* to be from the early Makkan period, although al-Suyūṭī and others maintain that it was revealed immediately after *Sūrah* 50, *Qāf*, in the middle of the Makkan period. A minority maintain that it is Madinan, or that all but the first four verses are Madinan (Āl). The sūrah takes its title from the mention of *this land* in the first verse. It begins with two oaths that lead into a discussion of the human condition (vv. 1–4). It then reproaches human beings for failing to realize the nature of their condition and failing to put their faculties and possessions to proper use (vv. 5–11), followed by instruction as to how they should act (vv. 12–17), and concluding with a contrast between the companions of the right and the companions of the left (vv. 18–20).

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

1. Nay, I swear by this land, 2. while thou art free in this land; 3. and [by] the begetter, and that which he begat, 4. truly We created man in travail. 5. Does he suppose that none will ever have power over him? 6. He says, “I have squandered vast wealth!” 7. Does he suppose that no one sees him? 8. Did We not make for him two eyes, 9. a
tongue, and two lips, and guide him upon the two highways? Yet he has not assailed the steep pass. And what will apprise thee of the steep pass? [It is] the freeing of a slave, or giving food at a time of famine to an orphan near of kin, or an indigent, clinging to the dust, while being one of those who believe and exhort one another to patience, and exhort one another to compassion. Those are the companions of the right. And those who disbelieve in Our signs, they are the companions of the left. Upon them is a Fire enclosed.

**Commentary**

1. Nay, I swear by this land,

   Some read this verse without *Nay*, interpreting that the article *lā* as one of emphasis rather than negation (Q). When read as an article of negation, it can be seen as a rebuke to those who are of the disposition criticized in vv. 5–11 (Q) or as a rebuke to the Quraysh (IK). *Land*, translating *balad*, can refer to Arabia, though a majority read it as “city,” referring to Makkah (Q, R, Ṭ, Ṭs, Z), and a minority say it refers to Madinah (Q). *Balad* can also be read in a more general manner as a reference to the earth.

2. while thou art free in this land;

   Most interpret this verse to mean that the Prophet is free to act as he deems best in Makkah (IK, Q, R,Ṭ). In this sense, it is seen as a direct response to the conquest of Makkah in 8/630 or, if revealed during the Makkan period, as a premonition of the conquest, in which a few members of the Quraysh were slain. Even in pre-Islamic times, Makkah was considered sacrosanct and fighting there was prohibited. That the Muslim armies spilled blood there during the conquest was thus seen as a grave violation. It is reported that the Prophet said, “Truly God
made Makkah sacred on the day that He created the heavens and the earth. Therefore, it is sacred until the Hour is come [i.e., the end of time]. And it was not made lawful (tuballa) to any before me and will not be made lawful to any after me; and it was only made lawful to me for one hour of a day” (IK, Q, R, Ṭs). Others say that this verse refers to God giving the Prophet free passage through Makkah, even if the Quraysh did not (Ṭs), for, as the Quraysh were the keepers of the Kaʿbah, it was a disgrace for them to not allow someone, let alone one of God’s messengers, access to it. The verse could also be read, “And thou art present in the land,” alluding to the fact that this land has been honored by God with the presence of His Messenger (R).

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3 and [by] the begetter, and that which he begat,

3 The begetter, and that which he begat means Adam and his progeny, or every begetter and every begotten (Q, R, Ṭ, Ṭs), thus all of humanity from its beginning to its end. Or the phrase can be seen as a reference to Abraham and Ishmael (R, Ṭs) or to Ishmael and his progeny (Q), both linking it to this land because of Abraham’s association with Makkah and because Ishmael was seen as the father of the Arabs; see 2:126c. Another metaphorical interpretation states that the begetter is the Prophet and that which he begat is his community (Q). Some also read it as an allusion to the Prophet’s descent from Abraham (ST).

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4 truly We created man in travail.

4 Many commentators relate this verse to the interpretation attributed to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, “Enduring the hardships of the world in life and the severities of the Hereafter” (IK, Q, Ṭs). Others relate it to 46:15, His mother carried him in travail and bore him in travail, and see it as a reference to the hardships of this world: from birth, to weaning, to earning a living, to growing old, to facing death (IK, R), for in life there is naught but toil and trial (R). Others see it as a reference to the trials of death, the grave, and the Day of Judgment (R). Travail translates kabad, which can also mean “erect” or “upright.” When read this way, this verse is sometimes interpreted as a reference to man being the only creature that walks upright upon two legs (Ṭ).
5 Does he suppose that none will ever have power over him?

6 He says, “I have squandered vast wealth!”

5–6 V. 5 asks, “Does man not think that he will be held accountable for all his actions?” In context, the implication is that those who are deluded by their own wealth do not realize that God outspreads and straitens provision for whomsoever He will (13:26; 17:30; 28:82; 29:62; 30:37; 34:36, 39) and can remove their wealth at any moment. It also implies both that people will be taken to account for how they have spent their wealth and that they are responsible for the manner in which wealth is obtained, no matter how philanthropic they may be. Some have said that v. 6 refers to Ḥarīth ibn Ėmīr, who, when the Prophet advised him to pay money for the atonement of a sin, objected, “My money has gone to atonements and payments since the day I entered the religion of Muhammad” (Q, Ṭs), thus implying that he did not understand the spiritual value of his expenditures and thought he had squandered his wealth.

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7 Does he suppose that no one sees him?

7 This verse asks, “Do people think that God will not ask how they obtained their wealth and how they spent it?” (R, Ṭ). Some say this refers to a specific individual who claimed to have spent money for Islam, though he had not spent anything (R, Ṭs). A hadīth says, “The servant does not move forward on the Day of Resurrection until he has been asked about three things: about his years, how he passed them; about his wealth, from what he acquired it and on what he spent it; and about his knowledge, what he did with it” (Āl); a Shiite version adds a fourth, “and about his love for the People of the Household [i.e., the family of the Prophet]” (Ṭs).

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8 Did We not make for him two eyes,

9 a tongue, and two lips,
The implication is that one who is able to make these subtle instruments from which human beings derive great benefit would certainly be able to know every deed and hold human beings accountable for what they have done with these instruments.

and guide him upon the two highways?

The two highways are interpreted to be those of good and evil, as in a well-known hadīth, “O people! There are only two highways: the highway of good and the highway of evil. Make not the highway of evil more beloved to you than the highway of good” (Q, Ṭ, Ṭs). Some commentators relate this to 76:3: Truly We guided him upon the way, be he grateful or ungrateful (IK, R).

Yet he has not assailed the steep pass.

And what will apprise thee of the steep pass?

Assail translates iqṭahama, meaning to do something with great intensity (R, Z) or to throw oneself into something without consideration of the consequences (Āl, Q). The implication is that those who contribute money for religious purposes, but then regret it, saying, I have squandered vast wealth (v. 6), or those who have failed to engage fully in similar religious duties have not achieved the full measure of sincerity—have not fully embarked upon the highway of good—and are not thankful for the great blessings God has provided, such as those mentioned in vv. 8–9. Thus al-Zamakhsharī glosses v. 11 with 3:117: The parable of what they spend in this life of the world is that of a frigid wind that strikes the tillage of a people who have wronged themselves, destroying it. God wrongs them not, but themselves do they wrong. In this interpretation, the steep pass is a metaphorical reference to distributing wealth in the manner mentioned in vv. 13–17 and accomplishing meritorious deeds. It is thus likened to “striving” (mujāhadah) for God (Q, R), as in a famous saying attributed to al-Ḥasan al-Īṣṣārī, “The steep pass of God is severe; it is the human being’s striving against his soul, his caprice, and his enemy, Satan” (Q, R). Some view the steep pass as an allusion to one or several of the obstacles that disbelievers will encounter in the Hereafter (Q, R, Ṭ). Given what follows in vv. 13–17, many read v. 12 to mean, “What will...
apprise thee of assailing the steep pass?” (Q). Al-Tustarī likens assailing the steep pass to attaining spiritual knowledge (maʿrifah), which can only be done through the power and strength of God by which one frees the soul of desire (ST).

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13 [It is] the freeing of a slave,

13 A ḥadīth states, “Whoever releases a believing slave (raqabah), he will be his ransom from the Fire” (Q, Ṭ). There is a debate as to which is more praiseworthy, charity (ṣadaqah) or the manumission of a slave. Some point to the placement of this verse before the following verses as an indication that manumission is superior (Q, Ṭ). This verse can also imply that one should free one’s own neck (raqabah) through repentance (Bg, Ṭs) or by performing the acts of worship by which one attains Paradise, since that is considered to be the greatest freedom (R).

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14 or giving food at a time of famine

14 This verse points to the fact that giving one’s wealth is more difficult in times of need, though of greater benefit. Thus al-Rāzī glosses this verse with 2:177; and 76:8: And give food, despite loving it, to the indigent, the orphan, and the captive.

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15 to an orphan near of kin,

15 This verse constitutes two meritorious acts, as one should be generous toward orphans and toward relatives (Q, Ṭ). Most maintain that orphan (yatīm) indicates one whose father has passed away; while some maintain it is both parents (R).

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16 or an indigent, clinging to the dust,
16 An indigent is one who has no home other than the dust (Q, Ṭ).

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17 while being one of those who believe and exhort one another to patience, and exhort one another to compassion.

17 One does not assail the steep pass by simply performing the deeds mentioned in vv. 13–16; one must do so on the basis of belief in God, the requisite condition for God’s acceptance of such deeds, as in 9:54: And naught prevented their spending from being accepted from them, save that they disbelieved in God and in His Messenger, and only come to the prayer lazily, and only spend reluctantly (Q). Exhorting to patience (cf. 103:3) pertains to encouraging one another in maintaining religious practice in the face of difficulties and opposition, and exhorting to compassion pertains to encouraging one another toward mercy unto God’s creatures (R). As a famous hadīth states, “The merciful are those unto whom the Merciful is merciful. Be merciful unto those on earth, and He who is in Heaven will be merciful unto you.”

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18 Those are the companions of the right.

19 And those who disbelieve in Our signs, they are the companions of the left.

18–19 For the companions of the right, who are said to be in Paradise, see 56:27–40, and for the companions of the left, who are said to be in the Fire, see 56:41–46. For the symbolic distinction between right and left, also see 17:71; 18:49; 56:8–9; 69:19–28; 84:7.

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20 Upon them is a Fire enclosed.

20 Cf. 104:8–9. Enclosed here means locked, for the doors of Hell have been locked upon the disbelievers so that they cannot leave; none of their distress will be lifted from them, and no spirit will enter upon them (R, Ṭs). Enclosed translates
muʾsadah, which can also mean “covered over.”