The Declining Day

*al-‘Asr*

A Makkan sūrah, *al-‘Asr* most likely follows Sūrah 94, *al-Sharḥ*, in the chronological order of revelation. It takes its title from the first word, *al-‘āṣr*, which can be understood to mean the late afternoon (hence the translation *declining day*), the last hour of the afternoon, the entire afternoon, the later afternoon prayer, or a period of time in the sense of an epoch. It is said that whenever two Companions of the Prophet would meet they would not part company until one of them had recited *al-‘āṣr* in its entirety and one of them had given greetings of peace to the other (IK). When viewed in relation to the previous sūrah, *‘āṣr* can be understood as a reference to time in general, meaning that *vying for increase* (102:1) prevents people from spending their time in the most beneficial manner and that the blessing of time is that for which people *will be questioned* (102:8). From one perspective, these three short verses contain the entire message of the Quran, namely, that human beings are in loss unless they turn to God. In this vein, the famous legal scholar al-Shāfiʿī is reported to have said, “Were the people to ponder this sūrah, it would suffice them” (IK).

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

1. By the declining day, 2. truly mankind is in loss, 3. save those who believe, perform righteous deeds, exhort
one another to truth, and exhort one another to patience.

**Commentary**

1. **By the declining day,**

   1 For the possible meanings of the *declining day* (**al-ʿaṣr**), see the introduction to this sūrah. Linguistically, ʿaṣr derives from the verb ʿaṣara, meaning “to squeeze,” and thus relates to time that is declining or fading quickly. Among those possible meanings, many judge the most likely to be the ʿaṣr prayer (Bd, Q, Z), which is considered to be the prayer referred to as the *middlemost prayer* in 2:238, though that verse is also interpreted in many different ways. Some also say the term in this verse refers to the “era (ʿaṣr) of the Prophet because of its bounty (fadl) through the renewal of prophethood in it” (Q). In this vein, this sūrah can be seen as pertaining to both the life of the individual and that of the human species; according to traditional Islamic belief, the fall of humanity continues as the historical cycle unfolds, and each generation is a degree below the generation before it.

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2. **truly mankind is in loss,**

   2 Vv. 2–3 are the response to the oath in v. 1 and are similar in meaning to 95:5–6: *Then We cast him to the lowest of the low, save those who believe and perform righteous deeds; for theirs shall be a reward unceasing.* The term *mankind* can be seen as a reference to disbelievers (Bg, Q) or to humanity in general (Q). Seen in light of the reference to the *declining day*, it can also be taken as a reference to humanity during the latter days of the historical cycle. According to 35:39, *the disbelief of the disbelievers increases them in naught but loss.* The Quranic understanding of loss pertains to *losing this world and the Hereafter* (22:11). The losers are thus those who lose what they value most in this life, although not necessarily purely material things, and in the next life, as in 39:15: *Truly the losers are those who lose their souls and their families on the Day of Resurrection. Yea! That is the manifest loss.* From a spiritual perspective, loss can also be seen as a reference to losing faith and attachment to God. When ʿaṣr is understood as a reference to time, v. 2 indicates that people who do not use their time properly are in a constant state of loss.
save those who believe, perform righteous deeds, exhort one another to truth, and exhort one another to patience.

3 In this context, truth can mean God (Q), the Quran (Bg, Q, Ṭs), or faith and professing Divine Unity (Bg, Ṭs); it can also mean that at the moment of death one says to those one leaves behind, and die not except in submission (3:102; Ṭs). Elsewhere believers are commanded, Be patient, vie in patience (3:200). Exhorting to patience (cf. 90:17) can be interpreted as encouraging one another in maintaining religious practice in the face of difficulties and opposition (R). The exhortation to truth and patience can thus be seen as an exhortation paralleling that between belief in God and performing righteous deeds (Sh) and, by extension, between all that one must know (discerning truth from falsehood) and all that one must do (maintaining the practices and principles of religion, no matter the obstacles). In this sense, this verse reflects the manner in which righteous deeds are believed to arise from and are always conjoined with faith and belief in God. In a broader sense, the sūrah emphasizes the two virtues of clinging to the truth and being patient in a world that has been spiritually darkened in general and at times full of spiritual crisis for a human being in particular.