

SURAH 36

Ya Sin

YĀ AND SĪN ARE TWO LETTERS of the Arabic alphabet and do not, as commonly assumed, denote a name of Prophet Muhammad. God swears by the Qur'an itself, saying: "I swear by the impeccable Qur'an that you [Muhammad] are a messenger, leading to a straight path" (2–4).

Besides being in itself a self-evident marvel, the Qur'an is supporting proof of Muhammad's truthfulness in his claim to be God's messenger, calling to God's straight path without any pretense or contrivance. The Qur'an: "is a revelation sent by the Almighty, the Merciful, so that you [Muhammad] may forewarn a heedless people, whose fathers had not been warned" (5–6).

Physical miracles are seldom intellectually enlightening. The people of Arabia inherited a deep-rooted tradition of idol worship, and were deemed unlikely to be persuaded to abandon it through spectacular feats. They needed elaborate revelation that would stimulate and challenge their minds and shake off their ignorance, as some of them were in total darkness. "We have bound their necks with chains reaching up to their chins, so that they cannot bow their heads" (8). The picture is of a people overwhelmed by ignorance that had bound them rigid and stiff so that they were not able to see the truth or recognize it. "We have put barriers before them and behind them and covered their vision, so that they cannot see" (9).

This is the outcome of blind and ignorant following which renders people insensitive and unresponsive to the truth.

You [Muhammad] shall only admonish those who believe in the Qur'an and fear the Merciful without having seen Him. Give these the good news of forgiveness and a rich reward. (11)

The surah is usually referred to as the “heart of the Qur'an.” Its main theme is the assertion of the principle of *tawhid*, Oneness of God, and its objective is to draw attention to God's magnificent creation and to call people to prepare for accountability to Him. It can be divided into an introduction followed by three distinct parts.

The introduction, as we have seen, speaks of the nature and the status of the Qur'anic revelation, addressing both its believers and detractors alike. The three parts provide historic, rational, and moral arguments respectively for the veracity and authenticity of the Qur'an.

The historic argument comes in the form of a tale relating the fate of a small village, not unlike Makkah of the sixth century AC, whose people had rejected God's revelation. The rational argument centers around the universe, with its order and intricate systems, as living physical proof for God's omnipotence and dominance over the whole of creation. The third argument revolves around the resurrection and man's accountability to God in the hereafter with the aim of convincing the Qur'an's recipients of the truth of God's revelation.

The first part of the surah starts with the words: “Relate to them, as a case in point, what happened to the people of a township when messengers came to them...” (13). The actual identity of the town in question is hardly of concern to us here. What really matters is the encounter and the events that ensued from it.

Ever since the time of Noah, the detractors of revelation believed that God's messengers had come to usurp their power and property, and so they met them with rejection and threats. The unbelievers in this town said to the messengers:

A Thematic Commentary on the Qur'an

“Your presence bodes for us nothing but evil. Desist, or we will stone you and inflict on you a painful scourge.” The messengers said, “The evil you forebode can come only from yourselves. You reject us only because we have come to admonish you. Surely you are true transgressors.” (18–19)

Elsewhere in the Qur'an we read what Noah's people had said to him:

“We see you but a mortal like ourselves. Nor do we see you followed by any but the lowliest among us, those who are rash and undiscerning. We see no superior merit in you: indeed we think that you are lying.” (*Hud*: 27)

The detractors notwithstanding, there will always be people who will recognize the truth and uphold and defend it. In this town, the duty fell to one man who stood up and asserted the following two facts:

1. The messengers were sincere individuals who sought no wealth or status.
2. They were calling to the true and only God, besides whom there is no other power capable of causing anyone any harm or any good.

The pious man is reported to have said: “My people, follow the messengers, who ask no reward of you and are rightly-guided. Why should I not serve Him who has created me and to whom you shall all be recalled?” (20–22).

The surah does not tell us whether the man was killed for the stand he had taken, or died naturally, but we learn that he failed in persuading his people to follow God's messengers. We are,

however, told of what he had to say after his death, having seen the rich rewards awaiting him. He said: ““Would that my people knew how my Lord has forgiven and honored me”” (26–27). Nevertheless, the ungrateful inhabitants of that town received their due punishment:

After him, We did not send [any armies] from heaven to destroy them: nor did We need to send down any. A single blow and they were lifeless! (28–29)

Arrogance can end in total annihilation. The price of rejecting God’s messengers and humiliating them can be very high indeed, and the more serious the crime the greater the punishment. God says: “Alas for these wretched people! They scorn every messenger that comes to them. Do they not see how many generations We have destroyed before them? They shall never come back to this world” (30–31).

This brief, but profound, tale makes one wonder about the future and fate of contemporary civilization which totally rejects God and dismisses His eventual judgment. Could it be inducing its own self-destruction?



The second part of the surah offers evidence for God’s omnipotence and magnificence. It starts with the statement:

One of [Our] signs is the infertile soil which We bring into life and let the grains grow out of it for their [humankind’s] sustenance. We furnish it with gardens of palm-trees and vineyards, and cause springs to gush out of it. (33–34)

Human beings are notorious in abusing the natural environment which is essential for their survival. There is a tradition among

farmers that the best melons are grown on pigeon droppings. Nature turns human and other remains and excrement into fertilizer, facilitating the growth of all kinds of crops and countless types of fruit and vegetables. The question then arises: who has made all this goodness possible and abundantly available? The surah answers:

Glory be to Him who created males and females of the plants that grow out of the soil, of humankind themselves, and of numerous living things they know nothing of. (36)

The surah turns our attention to the heavens and their fascinating constellations. The world is covered in darkness, but as the rays of the sun fall on the earth it brightens up into a sheet of light. When the rays disappear, darkness returns. The surah describes this process in these words: “The night is another sign for humankind. We withdraw from it the [light of] day, and they are plunged back into darkness” (37).

The sun and the moon might seem to be moving in the same orbit, but that is not the case; they move in two completely separate orbits and they are destined never to meet. When one reflects on the universe, one wonders what keeps these thousands upon thousands of stars and planets in their respective orbits? What energy drives them? Who constructed this amazingly stable and intricate system? Who determines the positions, speeds, orientations and directions of each and every one of them?

As humans we occupy a very tiny corner of this vast universe, and with our own eyes we can observe God’s marvelous signs. Some of us believe in God and others refuse to believe.

The surah takes us back to earth to point us towards the seas and oceans and the ships that sail in them. It says: “Another sign We gave them when we carried their offspring in the laden ark, and We have made them similar vessels to sail in” (41–42).

The sea is four times as large as the land and constitutes a far

bigger world. We now know that matter floats on water according to an exact scientific law; it floats or sinks according to precise equations. Will people not acknowledge that when they are faced with danger at sea, only God can rescue them?



Further supporting testimony is given towards the end of the surah. God says:

Do they not see that, among the things that Our hands have fashioned, We created for them beasts of which they are masters? We have subjected these to them; they use some for transport and they feed on some others. (71–72)

People in their millions eat and enjoy the flesh of animals every day, but are they aware of who had envisaged that and made it available?



The final part of the surah deals with two of the most fundamental religious principles: resurrection and judgment. Modern society ignores these two vital tenets and looks upon them with disdain. Modern culture teaches that a person's life, just like that of an animal, ends here in this world; there is no judgment or accountability.

The Day of Judgment, like death, is not possible to predict and will take people by complete surprise. The surah refers to this by saying:

They say, "When will this promise be fulfilled, if what you say be true?" There will be only a single blast which will overtake them while they are still arguing. They will have no time to make a will, nor shall they return to their kinfolk. (48–50)

A Thematic Commentary on the Qur'an

The meaning here is that when the Hour of Truth arrives, it shall be swift and decisive. It will happen while people are going about their normal business, in markets and other places. The Prophet is reported to have said:

The Hour would fall sooner than two traders in the market close a deal; it would fall within the time a man milks his she-camel and tastes the milk; it would come sooner than a man carries food to his mouth...

The Hour will come at such a speed that there will be no time left for making a will or doing anything else. Once life stands still all over the earth, God will command all human beings to rise and be ready to face the judgment.

... They will rise up from their graves and hasten towards their Lord. They will say, "Woe to us! Who has roused us from our resting place? This is what the Merciful had promised: the messengers have indeed told the truth." (51–52)

The surah gives a brief account of the happiness and tranquil life the believers will enjoy in Paradise. Those condemned to the hell-fire will be scolded and berated. God will admonish them:

Children of Adam, did I not charge you never to worship Satan, your declared foe, but to worship Me? Surely that was the right path. He has led a multitude of you astray. Have you no sense? (60–62)

Although the main theme of this part of the surah is the resurrection and judgment of humankind, it touches on other aspects of God's power and majesty, and His special magnanimity and generosity towards humankind.

By way of illustration of the resurrection, the surah gives a brief but extremely instructive example. It says:

Is man not aware that We created him from a little sperm, and yet he stands flagrantly contentious? Forgetting the example of his own creation, he asks, “Who will give life to decayed bones?” Say, “He who had first brought them into being; He has knowledge of every creature.” (77–79)

It stands to reason. He who had created once can certainly create a second time.

The Qur’an then draws attention to an important phenomenon observed in nature every day which is the result of a biological fact. Human beings breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide, while the reverse takes place in trees and plants. Carbon then becomes the main element that turns trees and plants into fuel. The surah says: “He [God] who gives you from the green trees fire that you use as fuel.” (80).

God brings the living out of the dead and the dead out of the living, and these natural processes are marvels attesting to His majesty and glory. Hence a fitting close: “Glory be to Him who has control of all things. To Him you shall all be recalled” (83).