

Surah al-A^{la} (87)

'The Highest'

سورة الأعلى

This surah derives its name from the prominence within it of the word *a^{la}* meaning 'most high'. Like the other Makkan surahs it is concerned with explaining principles of faith. And as Surah al-T^hariq concluded on the theme of Allah's plans for the disbelievers, so this surah opens on the theme of His being the Most High, emphasizing what went before.

By the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Beginning **by the name of Allah**, whose is the creation and the order. He is the First and the Last.

... **the Compassionate, the Merciful**. He who graces everything with mercy. Thus does He the Most High describe Himself so as to affect mercy in he who remembers Him, for He is grateful to whoever is grateful to Him, mindful of whoever is mindful of Him.

Glorify the name of thy Lord, the Highest, (1)

سَبِّحْ اسْمَ رَبِّكَ الْأَعْلَى

The address is in the singular. 'Glorify' is given for *sabbih* meaning to declare Him pure and holy and above all imperfection such as having partners or offspring, and to not attribute anything to Him that is contrary to the station of Divinity. The command to glorify the name has the effect of magnification, for whoever must glorify His name must of primacy glorify Him.

'The Highest' is given for *al-A^{la}* meaning higher than all other things, for nothing is higher than Him in knowledge or power or creativity or provision or any of the other Divine attributes, whether of His essence or His works.

Who creates then fashions, (2)

الَّذِي خَلَقَ فَسَوَّى

He created all people, then fashioned them to their perfection with precision and exactitude. For it is not that some people are perfectly formed and other imperfect. For He has fashioned the creation of every thing and then bestowed on it what brings it to perfection, according to its capabilities and capacities.

And who determines and then guides, (3)

وَالَّذِي قَدَّرَ فَهَدَى

'Determines' is given for *qaddara*, meaning to draw up a plan for something, like an architect draws his plans and then builds. And then He guides, that is He guides every creature to what benefits it. He creates, He provides the essential equipment, He fashions ready for life, and He guides, glory be to Him.

And who brings out the pastures, (4)

وَالَّذِي أَخْرَجَ الْمَرْعَى

He makes grow the greenery on which animals graze from the earth.

And then turns them into a greenish black straw. (5)

فَجَعَلَهُمُ غُنَاءً أَحْوَى

After their being green Allah turns them into dry straw scattered about with no firm connection to the earth, like the scum you see floating on flood-waters.

It is an instance of His guidance, glory be to Him, that He sent down the Qur'an to the Prophet. It is narrated that ibn ^cAbbas reported that when the Prophet was visited by Gabriel with the revelation he would recite it fearing that he would forget it, and so Gabriel would not depart when the Prophet had begun reciting it. And so Allah sent this verse:

Soon We shall set thee to recite so thou shall not forget, (6)

سَنُقَرِّئُكَ فَلَا تَنْسَى

That is, We shall reveal it to you for you to recite it to humankind, and you shall not forget any of it. For Allah, glory be to Him, willed for the Prophet to be purified of any forgetfulness, and the same was true of the other Prophets. As for His word “forget” it is of the form “We have forgotten ye” as in “Taste ye then – for your forgetting the meeting of this day of yours – We too have forgotten ye.” [32:14] [Forget here means neglect.] Perhaps this action was to instruct the Muslims thereafter to be eager for the Qur’an with a similar eagerness to that shown by the Prophet.

Save what Allah wills, indeed He knows the manifest and what is hidden, (7)

إِلَّا مَا شَاءَ اللَّهُ إِنَّهُ يَعْلَمُ الْجَهْرَ وَمَا يَخْفَى ﴿٧﴾

Save what Allah wills ... here is an indication that the Prophet's not forgetting any of it is a power granted to him from Allah, glory be to Him, and that if He willed otherwise then He would have made it so. And it is said that the inclusion of Allah's will in this verse shows that however high a station the Prophet had attained to, still all his affairs were in the hand of Allah, the Most High.

... indeed He knows what is manifest, ... meaning that which is spoken aloud and in public.

... and what is hidden, That is, He knows what is secret and spoken in private. And all of this giving the Prophet to recite and protecting him from forgetfulness was only what He willed according to His knowledge that encompasses all things; and according to His knowledge of what is best He made the Prophet not forget. Otherwise, were he forgetful, he would not be reliable for the message, due to the possibility of him forgetting in his words and his deeds.

And We shall ease thee to the easier, (8)

وَنُيَسِّرُكَ لِلْيُسْرَى ﴿٨﴾

That is, We shall make you successful on the path of ease in all affairs, for His laws, glory be to Him, deliver a person to felicity in the easiest of ways.

So remind, indeed the reminder benefits; (9)

فَذَكِّرْ إِنْ نَفَعَتِ الذِّكْرَى ﴿٩﴾

That is, remind humankind, O Messenger, of what has been placed within them: their natural inclinations that signify the Divinity and the return and suchlike. For such reminders are useful, even though they add nothing to the proofs that had been conclusively conveyed. If they were not beneficial, or if the Prophet saw them as being useless, he would not strive to guide for he would have no hope of success, nor would he see it as necessary to present the arguments and evidences, for they had already been conclusively presented. So there would be no need for him to remind.

He who fears shall be reminded, (10)

سَيَذَكَّرُ مَنْ يَتَّخِشُ ﴿١٠﴾

He who fears the chastisement of Allah, glory be to Him, will profit from the Qur’an and your words, O Messenger.

While the foulest will shun it, (11)

وَيَتَجَنَّبُهَا الْأَشْقَى ﴿١١﴾

The most miserable and most wretched (*al-ashqa*) will distance themselves from the reminders and admonishments. The disbeliever who shuns the reminders is more immersed in wretchedness than a sinner.

He who will enter the great fire, (12)

الَّذِي يَصَلِّي النَّارَ الْكُبْرَى ﴿١٢﴾

He enters the fire of hell and remains there.

And thereupon will neither die nor live. (13)

ثُمَّ لَا يَمُوتُ فِيهَا وَلَا يَحْيَى ﴿١٣﴾

He would not die within the fire so that that would be the end of his affliction, and yet he has no life, in the sense that he has none of the things that make life worth living.

***Thrived indeed has he who becomes purified,
(14)***

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ تَزَكَّى ﴿١٤﴾

He who cleanses himself and makes himself righteous by shunning the vices, and by adorning himself with the virtues, has achieved and succeeded and been saved.

***And remembers the name of his Lord and so
prays; (15)***

وَذَكَرَ اسْمَ رَبِّهِ فَصَلَّى ﴿١٥﴾

And remembers the name of his Lord ... That is, he remembers Allah, glory be to Him, in his heart; 'the name' is used to magnify Allah and denote His grandeur.

... and so prays: That is, to Allah, meaning that he becomes humble before Him; or that he performs the prayer which is an indication of man's humility and of his remembrance of Allah.

According to some narrations what is meant by this is the Zakaat al-Fitrah and the prayer of 'Id, but this would seem to be an instance of an application or embodiment (*misdaq*). And the application of the general import to a particular embodiment can be made at any time, whenever an embodiment exists. Thus there is no weight to the objection that the surah is Makkan and revealed at a time when there was no Zakaat al-Fitrah and no 'Id prayer.

Nay, ye prefer the lower life, (16)

بَلْ تُوْثِرُونَ الْحَيٰوةَ الدُّنْيَا ﴿١٦﴾

Lower life means this world. The address is in the plural, and therefore directed to those who do not purify themselves and do not pray. They choose to spend their wealth and their time in the pleasures of the near life, i.e. this world, rather than in self-purification and prayer.

***Though the hereafter is better, and more
lasting. (17)***

وَالْآخِرَةُ خَيْرٌ وَأَبْقَى ﴿١٧﴾

The afterlife, that is, paradise, is better than the low world. Its pleasures are more and are not spoiled by worry and vexation, and they do not end. For the afterlife is an eternal, unceasing world, whereas this world is finite and temporary.

Indeed that is in the earlier scriptures, (18)

إِنَّ هٰذَا لَفِي الصُّحُفِ الْاٰوَّلٰى ﴿١٨﴾

That: the account of the self-purifying, praying person's success, or the whole of what has been mentioned in this surah. All of Allah's revealed books encourage self-purification, charity, prayer and the other goodly activities; they are not innovations of the Qur'an.

The scriptures of Abraham, and of Moses. (19)

صُحُفِ اِبْرٰهِيْمَ وَمُوْسٰى ﴿١٩﴾

These two Messengers (Abraham and Moses, *peace be upon them*) are mentioned as examples, for otherwise all of Allah's Prophets called to purification, prayer and charity.