

Surah al-Shams (91)

'The Sun'

سورة الشمس

This surah derives its name from the prominence within it of the word *al-shams*, meaning 'the sun'. Like the other Makkan surahs it deals with matters of faith. In keeping with the previous surah it classifies mankind into two groups: those for the fire, and those for the paradise.

By the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

By the name of Allah ... We seek help with the name of Allah, who is the best of helpers for whoever seeks His help.

The Compassionate, the Merciful, who bestows by His mercy and affection upon all of creation, just as He says: '*My mercy encompasses all things.*' [7:156]

By the sun and its rays, (1)

وَالشَّمْسِ وَضُحَاهَا ﴿١﴾

An oath, by the sun and its extending brightness across the horizon.

By the moon when it follows it, (2)

وَالْقَمَرِ إِذَا تَلَّهَا ﴿٢﴾

The oath is by the moon, when it follows the sun. For it takes the sun's brightness and travels on its heel.

By the day when it unveils it, (3)

وَالنَّهَارِ إِذَا تَجَلَّىٰهَا ﴿٣﴾

The oath is by the day, which makes the sun clear. Here is graceful eloquence, for the attribution of the unveiling of the sun to the day is an instance of literary inversion (*qalb*); as if the sun owes its appearance to the clarity of the day. Arabic literature contains many instances of this.

By the night when it conceals it, (4)

وَاللَّيْلِ إِذَا يَغْشَىٰهَا ﴿٤﴾

The oath is by the night, that is termed as covering the sun and concealing it from sight and hiding it.

By the sky and what built it, (5)

وَالسَّمَاءِ وَمَا بَنَىٰهَا ﴿٥﴾

That is, by He who built the sky, meaning Allah, the Most High. Or perhaps what is meant by 'what' is the precision and exactitude with which it is constructed.

By the earth and what spread it, (6)

وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا طَحَىٰهَا ﴿٦﴾

An oath by the earth and He who spread it, and He is Allah. Or perhaps what is meant is its spreading, similar to the previous verse.

By a soul and what fashioned it, (7)

وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا ﴿٧﴾

The oath is by the soul, every soul, which is presented with the indefinite form for the sake of variety and eloquence. 'What' in the verse means 'who', that is, and (by) Allah who fashioned it. This interpretation is more in fitting with the portents that follow it.

Then inspired it its brazenness and its guardfulness; (8)

فَأَلَّهَمَّهَا هُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا ﴿٨﴾

'Inspired' is given for *al-hama*, meaning to teach by means of delivering knowledge to the heart. 'Its brazenness' (*fujur*): its disobedience. Its guardfulness' (*taqwa*): its obedience. For every human being discriminates between goodness and evil, between obedience and disobedience.

These oaths in this surah and elsewhere direct attention to these signs and teachings, besides their being oaths.

Thrived indeed has he who purifies it, (9)

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا ﴿٩﴾

This is the consequent or the point of the oaths. It is what is sworn to by them. The meaning is that whoever purifies his soul and cleanses it of sins and disbelief has achieved success.

And failed indeed has he who corrupts it. (10)

وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسَّاهَا ﴿١٠﴾

He who corrupts it, leaving it dirty and concealed by a gloom, through disbelief and disobedience, has failed, has accrued a loss upon himself. To 'corrupt' is used for *dassa*, the opposite of *zakka* for which 'purify' is used.

The thread of the message then turns to warn those who corrupt their souls that their fate is the fate of the previous nations who belied:

Thamud belied through their inordinacy, (11)

كَذَّبَتْ ثَمُودُ بِطَغْوَاهَا ﴿١١﴾

Thamud were the tribe of the Prophet *Sālih*. Inordinacy brings about disbelief and belying the truth, as Allah has said: 'Then evil was the end of those who did evil, for they belied the signs of Allah.' [30: 10]. 'Inordinacy' is put for *tāghwa*, meaning exceeding the limit in sin.

When its foulest was sent, (12)

إِذْ أَنْبَعَتْ أَشْقَاهَا ﴿١٢﴾

The foul and evil leaders of Thamud sent the worst of them to perform the evil deed. His name was Qidaʿ, and it was he who hamstrung the camel.

So the Messenger of Allah said to them, 'The camel of Allah, and its watering!' (13)

فَقَالَ لَهُمْ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ نَاقَةَ اللَّهِ وَسُقْيَاهَا ﴿١٣﴾

'So Allah's Messenger said to them' follows from 'belied ...', not from 'they sent ...'. 'Them' means the tribe of the Thamud. The Messenger of Allah was *Sālih*. He told them to respect the camel and not do it any harm, and to respect its water, that is, its drinking from the water, and to not prevent it from drinking it. There was a stream and *Sālih* determined that the camel should drink from it on alternate days, so as to give in return milk sufficient for the tribe's needs, while on the other days it was for the people to drink from it. And he told them that if they did any harm to the camel they would be taken by a chastisement.

But they belied him and slaughtered it, so their Lord destroyed them for their sin, and so evened it. (14)

فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَعَقَرُوهَا فَدَمْدَمَ عَلَيْهِمْ رَبُّهُم بِذُنُوبِهِمْ فَسَوَّاهَا ﴿١٤﴾

﴿١٤﴾

Thamud belied *Sālih* and killed the camel by striking its four legs with a sword. He who did this was one man, but the action is attributed to them all on account of their participating in the decision and being content with it. So Allah the Most High 'enveloped them under chastisement' i.e. destroyed them entirely for their sin of killing the camel. 'and so evened it' is given for "*fa-sawwaha*", and it may be taken as referring to the totality of their destruction; in that the crushing and destruction was applied evenly to all of them such that none escaped it. "*fa-sawwaha*" may also be taken in reference to their land or city, in that the Almighty levelled the ground such that there remained no trace of them.

And He fears not its consequence. (15)

وَلَا يَخَافُ عُقْبَاهَا ﴿١٥﴾

Allah has no fear of any sequel to the destruction. For He is the absolute authority, who is not subject to any consequence for His acts. He is not like human beings who, however powerful and however great their authority, fear the consequences of their acts.