

Al-Zukhruf [Ornaments]

Makkan Period

In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate

[1] *Ha. Mim.*

[2] By the Clear Book;

[3] verily We have made it an Arabic Qur'an that you may understand.¹

[4] Indeed it is transcribed in the Original Book² with Us; sublime and full of wisdom.

[5] Should We divert this Good Counsel from you because you are a people immersed in extravagance?

[6] How many a Prophet did We send to the earlier peoples!

[7] Yet never did a Prophet come to them but they mocked him.

[8] We utterly destroyed them although they were greater in might than these. The examples of ancient peoples have gone before.

1. The object of the Qur'anic oath is to affirm that God Himself is the Author of this Book rather than Muhammad (peace be on him). Moreover, the attribute of the Qur'an chosen for the oath is its perspicacity. To swear by the Qur'an with mention of this attribute means to give the following message to the people: "O people, this is an open Book before you. Read it with open eyes. Its themes, its teachings, its language, its diction, are all clear proofs of the fact that none but the Lord of the universe is the Author of this Book."

*2. "Umm al-Kitab" means the "Original Book," one that is the prime source of all the Books sent down to the Prophets. In **Surah al-Buruj** (85: 22) this is described as **Lawh Mahfuz** ("the Preserved Tablet"), that is, the Tablet containing inscriptions that cannot suffer effacement, those that are secure against every sort of tampering.*

[9] Yet if you were to ask them: "Who created the heavens and the earth?" they will certainly say: "The All-Mighty, the All-Knowing has created them."

[10] He it is Who made this earth for you a cradle and made in it pathways for you³ that you may find the way to your destination;

[11] He Who sent down water from the sky in a determined measure, and thereby We revived a dead land: likewise will you be raised up (from the earth) –

[12] He Who created these pairs, all of them, and provided you ships and cattle on which you ride,

[13] so that when you are mounted upon them you may remember the bounty of your Lord, and say: "Glory be to Him Who has subjected this to Us whereas we did not have the strength to subdue it.

[14] It is to our Lord that we shall eventually return.”

[15] Yet they have made some of His servants a part of Him. Indeed man is most evidently thankless.

[16] Has Allah taken for Himself daughters out of those whom He creates and has chosen you to have sons?

[17] (They believe so although when) any of them is given tidings of the birth of a female child the like of which he assigns to the Merciful One, his countenance darkens and he is choked with grief.

3. The passes in the mountains and the rivers in the mountainous and plain regions are the natural paths which God has created on the surface of the earth. It is by traversing these paths that human beings have spread over the earth. But God's favour was not confined to this: He did not stamp the whole world with a dull uniformity; instead, He created many landmarks by which people can distinguish between one region and another.

[18] Do they assign to Allah one who grows up amidst ornaments and is not well-versed in the art of disputation?

[19] They claim that angels, who are Allah's chosen servants, are females. Did they witness how their body is constituted? Their testimony shall be written and they shall be called to account.

[20] They say: "Had the Merciful One so willed, we would never have worshipped these deities."⁴ But they have no knowledge of the matter and are simply conjecturing.

[21] Or did We bestow upon them a Book before on whose authority they are holding on (to angel-worship)?

[22] Nay; they simply claim: "We found our forefathers on a way, and we continue to find guidance in their footsteps."

[23] And thus it is: whenever We sent any warner to a city its affluent ones said: "We found our forefathers on a way and we continue to follow in their footsteps."

[24] Each Prophet asked them: "Will you do so even if we were to show you a way better than the way of your forefathers?" They answered: "We disbelieve in the religion with which you have been sent."

[25] Then We exacted retribution from them. So do consider the end of those who gave the lie (to the Prophets).

4. *This was the rationale of their straying: that if they had strayed it could not be otherwise, for after all, that was God's predetermined will. It is significant that those given to erroneous ways have always been wont to put faith in this line of argument.*

[26] Call to mind when Abraham said to his father and his people: "I totally disown all whom you serve

[27] except the One Who created me; and, behold, it is He Who will direct me to the Right Way."

[28] And Abraham left behind this word to endure among his posterity so that they may return to it.⁵

[29] (Even when they began worshipping others than Allah We did not destroy them) but bestowed sustenance on them and on their forefathers until there came to them the Truth and a Messenger who clearly expounded things to them.

[30] And when the Truth came to them they said: "This is just sorcery and we reject it."

[31] They say: "Why was this Qur'an not sent down upon some great man from the two (main) cities?"⁶

[32] Is it they who distribute the Mercy of your Lord? It is We Who have distributed their livelihood among them in the life of this world, and have raised some above others in rank that some of them may harness others to their service. Your Lord's Mercy is better than all the treasures that they hoard.

5. *That is: "Whenever they deviate even a little from the Right Path, this 'Word' should be there to guide them so that they find their way back to it." This event is mentioned here in order to arouse a sense of shame among the Quraysh unbelievers. The thrust of the statement is: "When you decided to follow in the steps of your ancestors, you did not opt to follow the good ones, the likes of the Prophets Abraham and Ishmael. Instead, amongst them that you chose to follow were those that were evil to the core."*

6. *"The two cities" mentioned here signify Makkah and Ta'if. What the unbelievers meant by saying so was that had God really wanted to raise a Messenger and send down a Book to him, He would have selected some truly distinguished person from their major cities.*

[33] Were it not that all mankind would become a single community (and follow the same way), We would have provided for all those who disbelieve in the Merciful One silver roofs for their houses, and (silver) stairs on which to go up,

[34] and (silver) doors to their houses, and couches (of silver) upon which they would recline;

[35] or that they be made of gold. Surely all this is only the enjoyment of the life of the world. But (true prosperity) in the Hereafter with Your Lord is only for the God-fearing.

[36] He who is negligent to remember the Merciful One, to him We assign a satan as his boon companion,

[37] and these satans hinder them from the Right Path, while he still reckons himself to be rightly-guided.

[38] But when he comes to Us, he will say (to his satan): "Would that there had been between me and you the distance as between the East and the West. How evil a companion you were!"

[39] (He will then be told): "Today it will not benefit you the least that after your wrongdoing you and your satans now share the chastisement."

[40] Can you, (O Prophet), then make the deaf hear, or direct to the Right Way the blind or one lost in manifest error?

[41] We shall inflict retribution on them, whether We take you away from the world (before We do that),

[42] or make you see the end that We had promised them, for We have full power over them.

[43] So hold fast to what has been revealed to you. Surely you are on the Straight Way.

[44] Verily it is a great source of eminence for you and your people, and soon you will be called to account concerning that.⁷

[45] Ask all Our Messengers whom We sent before you whether We had appointed any deities beside the Merciful One to be worshipped.⁸

[46] Indeed We sent Moses with Our Signs to Pharaoh and his nobles. He told them: "I am a Messenger of the Lord of the Universe."

[47] Yet when he brought forth Clear Signs from Us, then lo, they burst into laughter.

[48] Every Sign that We showed them was greater than its predecessor; and then We seized them with Our chastisement so that they may return (to the Right Way).

[49] (Whenever they faced an affliction) they would say: "O magician, pray for us to your Lord according to your station with Him. We shall certainly be guided to the Right Way"

[50] But lo, each time We removed Our affliction from them, they would go back on their word.

[51] And Pharaoh proclaimed among his people: "My people, do I not have dominion over Egypt, and are these streams not flowing beneath me? Can't you see?"

[52] Am I better or this contemptible man who is scarcely able to express himself?

7. *The point stressed here is that no person can have greater luck than that he should be chosen by God to receive His Book. Nor can a nation have greater luck than that it should be chosen by God to raise His Messenger among it to the exclusion of other nations, and that it should have sent down His Book in their tongue, and grant them the opportunity to rise as the standard-bearers of His Message in the world. If the Quraysh and the people of Arabia did not realise how great an honour had been conferred upon them and they were unappreciative of this, then a time will come when they will be called to account for this.*

8. *"Ask other Messengers" means that they should look into the Books granted to them and find out for themselves.*

[53] Why were bracelets of gold not bestowed upon him? Why did a retinue of angels not accompany him as attendants?"

[54] He incited his people to levity and they obeyed him. Surely they were an iniquitous people.⁹

[55] So when they incurred Our wrath, We exacted retribution from them, and drowned them all,

[56] and made them a thing of the past and an example for those who would come after them.

[57] No sooner the example of the son of Mary was mentioned than, lo and behold, your people raised a clamour

[58] and said: "Who is better, our deities or he?"¹⁰ They said so only out of contentiousness. They are a disputatious people.

[59] He was no more than a servant (of Ours), one upon whom We bestowed Our favours and whom We made an example (of Our infinite power) for the Children of Israel.

9. *This short sentence epitomises a great truth. When a person acts despotically in the world and brazenly pursues this with deception and trickery, putting a price on people's conscience and mercilessly oppressing and trampling on those who refuse to sell their conscience, such people, even if they do not say so directly, nevertheless convey by their actions that they take their compatriots' intelligence, moral calibre and worth lightly, that they consider them cowards, a dumb cattle that can be driven in any direction. Eventually when their designs meet with success and the common people become their obedient slaves, this simply confirms that what he had thought was indeed true. The basic reason for their becoming victims of indignity is that they were given to sinful conduct.*

10. *It was said in verse 45 above that people may ask all the other Messengers who were sent before Muhammad (peace be on him) if We had appointed any other gods to be worshipped besides the One True God. When this was presented before the people of Makkah, a person put forth the objection: "Is it not a fact that the Christians hold the son of Mary to be the son of God and worship him for that reason? What is wrong, then, with our gods?" No sooner was this said than loud laughter broke out among the crowd who then exerted pressure that an answer be provided to this objection.*

[60] If We had so willed We could have made some of you into angels to become your successors on earth.

[61] Verily he [i.e., Jesus] is a portent of the Hour. So be in no doubt concerning it¹¹ and follow Me. This is the Straight Way.

[62] Let not Satan hinder you (from believing in the Hour), for surely he is your open enemy.

[63] When Jesus came with Clear Signs and said: "I have brought wisdom to you that I may make plain to you some of the things you differ about. So fear Allah and follow me.

11. This can also be translated as follows: "He is a means to the knowledge of the Resurrection." Here a question arises: In what sense has Jesus Christ been called a sign or a means of knowledge of the Resurrection? Many Qur'anic commentators say that this refers to the second coming of the Prophet Jesus which has been foretold in a large number of traditions, but this meaning is contradicted by the very next verse. For Jesus' second coming can be a means of knowledge of Resurrection only for those who are alive at that time or are born thereafter. So how can he be regarded as a means of knowledge for the Makkan unbelievers who are being asked not to have any doubts about it? Therefore, in our opinion, the true meaning of the verse is the one given by some other Qur'anic commentators, according to whom the Prophet Jesus' fatherless conception and his making a bird out of clay and his raising the dead back to life are presented as proof of the possibility of Resurrection. So, God's directive here would mean this: "Why do you think it is impossible for God to raise you and all mankind from death, when He can create a child without a father and a servant of His can breathe life into a clay image and raise the dead back to life?"

[64] Allah is my Lord and your Lord; therefore, serve Him. That is the Straight Way."¹²

[65] Then the factions fell apart among themselves.¹³ So woe to the wrong-doers from the chastisement of a grievous Day.

[66] Are they awaiting anything other than the Last Hour that it should suddenly come upon them without their even perceiving it?

[67] On that Day even bosom friends shall become enemies to one another, all except the God-fearing.

[68] (It will be said to them): "My servants, today you have nothing to fear or regret,

[69] you who believed in Our Signs and had surrendered yourselves (to Us)!

[70] Enter Paradise joyfully, both you and your spouses."

[71] Platters and cups of gold shall be passed around them, and there shall be all that they might desire and all that their eyes might delight in. (They shall be told): "Herein shall you abide forever.

[72] Such is the Paradise that you shall inherit by virtue of your good deeds in the life of the world.

12. Regardless of what the Christians might have said or done, Jesus did not lay claim to being God or the son of God, nor did he ask anyone to worship him. On the contrary, he called people exactly to what the previous Prophets had called and to which the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) was calling, viz. to exclusively serve and worship the One True God.

13. People went to extremes both in supporting and opposing Jesus (peace be on him). Those who opposed him went so far as to blaspheme him, branding him illegitimate. At the other end of the spectrum were those who exaggerated Jesus' status and exalted him to the point of deifying him. But then the question of how a human being could also be God became extremely complicated. The result was that all subsequent efforts to solve the problem have proved futile and all attempts to resolve the issue gave rise to a number of schisms and sects.

[73] Herein you will have abundant fruits of which you will eat."

[74] But the evil-doers shall abide in the torment of Hell.

[75] Never will their torment be lightened for them. They shall remain in utter despair.

[76] It is not We Who wronged them; rather, it is they who wronged themselves.

[77] They shall call out: "O Malik, ¹⁴ let your Lord put an end to us." He will reply: "You must stay on in it.

[78] We brought you the Truth; but to the truth most of you were averse."¹⁵

[79] Have they contrived some scheme? ¹⁶ If so, We too will contrive a scheme.

[80] Or do they think that We do not hear their secret talks and their whispering counsels? Yes, indeed We do and Our messengers [i.e., angels] are with them, writing.

[81] Say: "If the Merciful One had a son, I would have been the first one to worship him."

[82] Exalted be the Lord of the heavens and the earth, the Lord of the Throne, above what they attribute to Him.

[83] So leave them alone to indulge in their Vanities and to frolic about until they encounter that Day of theirs against which they have been warned.

14. Malik, as is evident from the context, refers to the Keeper of Hell.

15. The Keeper of Hell's statement that "We brought you the truth," resembles an official's use of the pronoun "we" when he speaks on behalf of his government.

16. *This hints at the decisive plan that the chiefs of the Quraysh were preparing in their secret assemblies, a plan which aimed at doing away with the Prophet (peace be on him).*

[84] He it is Who is God in the heavens and the earth. He is the Most Wise, the All-Knowing.

[85] Blessed is He Who has dominion over the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. With Him is the knowledge of the Hour; and to Him you shall all be sent back.

[86] Those whom they call upon, instead of Allah have no power of intercession, except such that testify to the truth based on knowledge.¹⁷

[87] If you were to ask them: "Who created them?" they will surely say: "Allah."¹⁸ Whence are they, then, being led astray?

[88] We call to witness the cry of the Messenger: "O Lord, these are a people not wont to believe!"¹⁹

[89] Indulge them, (O Prophet), and say to them: "Peace to you." For soon they shall come to know.

17. *Some people believe that the beings whom they themselves had made into gods possessed the power to intercede with God. They imagined that those deities too wielded such a powerful influence with God that they could secure the forgiveness of whomsoever they wanted. Hence such people are asked a simple, straightforward question: "Can they testify to the truth of that claim on the basis of sure knowledge?"*

18. *This verse seems to mean two things: (1) "If you were to ask them who has created them, they will say: 'Allah'." (2) "If you were to ask them who is the Creator of their gods, they will say: 'Allah'."*

19. *In this verse, recourse is made to swearing by the Prophet's statement: "O Lord, these are a people not wont to believe." Indeed how strange it is. These unbelievers admitted that God was the Creator of their gods. Notwithstanding this, they persisted in worshipping God's creatures rather than God Himself.*