

Chapter 100: AL-'ADIYAT (The Runners)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate

Overview:

This surah has 11 verses. It gets its name from the word al-'adiyat (the chargers) in the first verse. The period of revelation of this surah is disputed. Abdullah bin Masud, Jabir, Hasan Basri, Ikrimah, and Ata say that it is Makki. Anas bin Malik, and Qatadah say that it is Madani. Two conflicting views have been reported from Ibn Abbas, first that it is a Makki, and second that it is Madani. The subject matter of the surah and its style however indicate that it is Makki. In fact, it was probably one of the earliest chapters revealed in Makkah.

Reason of Revelation:

Bazzar, Ibni Munzir, Ibni Abi Hatim, and Daraqutni and Ibni Marduya narrated from Ibni Abbas that: Rasulallah, peace be upon him, sent out scouts to patrol around Madina. No news have been received regarding the horsemen after a month had passed by. That's when this surah was revealed. In Alusi's narration: Rasulallah, peace be upon him, sent out horsemen for Bani Kinana under the command of Munzir ibni Amr al-Ansari. The hypocrites started to spread a rumor that they were killed when no news were received from them for a month. This chapter was then revealed to give the glad tidings that the horsemen were safe. These reports are advanced to support the opinion that the chapter is Madani. A reason of revelation in support of the first opinion that the chapter is Makki has not been found. (Hamdi Yazir)

Main Themes:

There are four recurring themes that prevail in the Qur'an, namely the unity of the Divine Being, the institution of messengership, life after death, and worship and justice. The surah among others explains in few words the last two of these four main themes. That is probably why Rasulallah, peace be upon him, said in a hadith narrated from Ibn Abbas that "The surah al-'adiyat is equivalent to half of the Qur'an." (Shawqani)

Style:

This surah is presented in rapid and powerful strokes. The text moves swiftly from one scene to another. As we come to the last verse, everything (the verbal expressions, connotations, subject matter and rhythm) settle down in a manner similar to that of a courser reaching the finishing line. The rhythm of the surah is robust and thunderous, and thus fits well with the dusty and clamorous atmosphere generated by the upturned graves and the secrets pulled out of people's breasts as pointed out at the end of the surah. These characteristics of the rhythm are also appropriate to the picture of ingratitude, thanklessness and extreme miserliness. The framework for this picture is provided by a dusty and tumultuous stampede of horses racing and thundering. Thus the frame and the picture are in perfect harmony with each other. (Qutb)

The surah has three passages where the ending in each passage changes with the content of the passage, adding to the matchless beauty of the surah. The short verses in the first passage help the imagination to picture the quick moves of al-'adiyat. The intonation of each word fits

perfectly with its meaning in each verse. One can almost hear the sound of panting in the word 'dabhan', for example, and the sound of the stroke in the word 'kadhan'.

Noble Meaning:

1. (والعاديات ضبحا) By the chargers that run panting, 2. (فالموريات قدحا) Striking sparks of fire, 3. (فالمغيرات صببها) Rushing to make sudden raids at morn, 4. (فاثرن به نقعا) Raising thereby a trail of dust, 5. (فوسطن به جمعا) Arriving thereby in the center collectively.

The verses of the Qur'an have multiple layers of meanings, all of which may be accurate as long as they are derived following methods and the principles of Qur'anic sciences. Below is a list of five interpretations among many others that are found in commentaries. We then present a new interpretation of the surah.

Traditional Views:

1. One interpretation of this passage is that it gives a description of the general chaos and confusion prevailing in pre-Islamic Arabia. Bloodshed, loot and plunder raged on every side. Tribes were subjecting tribes to raids, and no one could have peaceful sleep at night from fear that some enemy tribe might raid his settlement early in the morning. Most everyone must have been conscious of this state of affairs and had realized that it was wrong. Unaware of the second life after death and his accountability before God, man has become ungrateful to his Lord and Sustainer. He is using the powers and abilities given by God for perpetrating tyranny and pillage. Blinded by the love of worldly wealth he tries to obtain it by every means, however impure and filthy, and his own state itself testifies that by abusing the powers bestowed by his Lord he is being ungrateful to Him. He would never have behaved so, had he known the time when the dead will be raised from the graves, and when the intentions and motives with which he had done all sorts of deeds in the world will be exposed and brought out before everyone to see. (Maududi)
2. Another interpretation is that these verses are concerned with Muslim vanguards. This is the opinion of the scholars who thought the surah was revealed in Madina as explained above. The fact that God swears by the horses provides a suggestion that this passage praises the vanguards of Islam as they put their lives at risk for the protection of Madina. The passage therefore deals with the zeal and enthusiasm of the companions of the Prophet and with the great sacrifices they made against heavy odds in the way of Allah.
3. Imam Ali and Abdullah ibn Mas'ud interpreted al-'adiyat as the camels of the pilgrims. The pilgrims rush from Arafat to Muzdalifah, and then dash from Muzdalifah to Minah on camels as a part of hajj (pilgrimage) rituals. They used to start campfires when they arrived Mudalifah, and join the host of pilgrims there. (Al-Qurazi)
4. The root 'a-d-w' of the word al-'adiyat means in general to trespass boundaries. Some interpreted this passage from psychological standpoint, and presented their opinion that the description may be a reference to those who trespass limits in their hatred and enmity for others,

in this context, the companions and early muslims. They huff and puff as their hearts are hot with enmity and hatred, spark fires with their bitter words, gallop to the raid in the morning, kicking a dust as they penetrate into the midst of a host. They are ungrateful of what they have, and are extremely selfish. Qur'an draws attention to their negative attitudes that exist to some extent in all human beings, and warns that Allah is fully aware of whatever people do. By hearing this rebuke, Muslims are instructed to avoid these character traits.

Modern Views:

5. According to Ikrimah, a classical commentator who lived in the first century in Islamic calendar, the second verse refers to arms of war. Following that suggestion, modern commentators, such as Hamdi Yazır, maintain that these verses also imply firearms that use gunpowder, especially modern tanks and other armored weaponry.

Motivated by this view, I would like to advance a fresh interpretation of these verses. I believe this passage may be interpreted as a millennium aged description of combustion engines commonly used in motor vehicles. Qur'an being the universal message of Allah for all times till the end of the world speaks occasionally of the wonders of technology that are developed in the modern ages, albeit not in detail, to confirm its divine origin.

A quick review of how combustion engines work would be useful. The four-stroke internal combustion engine, for example, is the type most commonly used for automotive and industrial purposes today. On the first stroke of the power cycle, called the intake, a descending piston draws in a fuel-air mixture into the cylinder through an inlet valve. In the following stroke, called the compression, the piston rises while both the inlet and exhaust valves are closed, compressing the fuel-air mixture to an explosive level. The power stroke begins just before the piston reaches the top when the spark plug ignites the mixture. The resulting explosive force pushes the piston down and turns the crankshaft. In the final exhaust stroke, the exhaust valve opens, piston rises pushing up and evacuating the burned gasses from the chamber until at the top of the stroke exhaust valve closes. The intake valve then opens and the four-stroke power cycle begins again.

[Side Note: The first known crankshaft was constructed by Al-Jazari in 1206. A crankshaft transforms continuous rotary motion into a linear reciprocating motion or vice versa, and is central to all modern machinery such as the steam engine, internal combustion engine and automatic controls, etc. (Wikipedia)]

A New Interpretation:

With this background information, let's read these verses over again: In the first verse "By those that run with panting", the runners (ال معاديات) may be interpreted as the pistons and the panting (ضج) may be viewed as a description of the intake of air-fuel mixture and the exhaust of combustion gases at a high speed.

The phrase sparks of fire (قدحا) in the second verse is an exact translation of the word ignition, and the strikers (الم حورات) may therefore be interpreted as the spark plugs and the ignition system in the combustion engine.

In the third verse, the chargers (المغبرات) is derived from a verb that also means to move swiftly, and to enter into a wide terrain (Hamdi Yazir). The verse therefore may be interpreted as a reference to the morning rush as motor vehicles propelled by their combustion engines enter the main roads and highways moving swiftly to reach their final destination.

The word that is translated as a trail of dust (الغبار) in the fourth verse also means a groundwater deposit, and the water that accumulates in the well that opens to the deposit. (Qurtubi) In this context, I think this word can be interpreted as the fuel that the combustion engine needs to run. In addition, the translation of this word as dust would also apply to the context. The verb to raise (أثرت) in this verse also means to blow, to stir up, to scatter and to waste. (Hamdi Yazir)

Therefore, the verse may be interpreted as a reference to the blowing of fuel into the chambers of the engine which in return raises a trail of exhaust gases as a result of combustion.

Finally, the fifth verse may refer to the arriving of motor vehicle into a host at the final destination whether that may be the parking lot in front of the company building where one works, or a shopping center, etc. The meaning is clearly consistent with our interpretation here.

It should be mentioned that Qur'an points out certain scientific facts and wonders of technology in variety of ways: sometimes using figures of speech and metaphors such as we see in this chapter, sometimes directly in a way that can be understood by most everybody albeit at different levels of comprehension, and sometimes in the form of narrating the miracles worked by Allah in the hands of prophets, peace and blessings of Allah be upon them all. However, Qur'an does not talk about these scientific facts as a book of science would. Qur'an speaks about science and technology to furnish further evidence especially for the man of modern ages for its divine origin in order so that people pay attention to it and receive the guidance revealed therein. Qur'an talks about wonders of technology in due proportion compared to the wonders of creation that subsists life such as sun, moon, earth, rain, etc. In addition, the Qur'anic descriptions are given in such a way that they would not appear misleading to the earlier generations, and would not force them to affirming faith without exercising their free will.

What is then the guidance we receive in this chapter that will lead us to the straight path and help us succeed in this world and in the hereafter? Two main lessons made explicit in the following passages are the virtue of gratefulness and the affirmation of the truth that man will be called to account for all his actions and intentions, and thus urged to getting ready for the eternal life.

Man should be grateful for his creation in the best stature, both physically and spiritually. He is made capable of devising such tools as motor vehicles, airplanes, etc. that make his life much easier. Moreover, the fossil fuels are certainly a major favor of Allah for the man of the modern ages, without which combustion engines would not have been developed. The formation of fossil fuels takes millions of years. It is by the infinite mercy of Allah that such fuels are made ready for the service of modern man. Does man in return acknowledge and appreciate these great favors and blessings? Let's read:

6. (وانه على ذلك لشهيد) Surely human is ungrateful to his Lord; 7. (ان الانسان لربه لكنود)

and to this he himself bears witness, 8. (وانه لحب الخير لشديد) and truly, he is passionate in his love of wealth.

First, the apparent mismatch that the oaths in the initial verses are of positive import, whereas this passage mentions a negative aspect of human nature should be clarified. This is because the verses in second passage condemn those who do not appreciate God's favor of guidance upon humankind as embodied in Islam. The initial verses on the other hand praise the Muslim warriors who respond to the wrongdoers who attack them for reasons of religious intolerance or in betrayal of their agreements with them. Such a discrepancy does not exist in other interpretations.

The ungrateful (كنود) in verse 6 is usually explained to be the one who is never content with what he or she has been given by Allah, but always feels miserable and needy of what he or she does not have. Tirmizi reports that Rasulullah, peace be upon him, said "the ungrateful is the one who eats alone, does not pay taxes and mistreats his servants," pointing out the selfish, egocentric and materialistic worldview of the ungrateful. How fitting is this description to the man of the modern ages of advanced technology..

However, the uncorrupted conscience of human beings bears witness to their purposeful ingratitude and rebellion against God. Moreover, the life, attitudes, and acts of an ungrateful person attest to his or her demonstration of ingratitude to God. Finally, humans themselves, as well as their limbs and body organs, will bear witness against their ingratitude on the Day of Resurrection. (Ali Unal) As an alternative translation, Qatadah and Sufyan al-Thawri both said the third person pronoun in verse 7 refers to Allah. That is, Allah is a witness to their ingratitude.

There are two opinions concerning verse 8 as well. First is that it means he is passionate in his love of wealth. The other view is that he is severe and resolute in his attitude against doing good deeds. Both interpretations have essentially the same meaning. (Ibn Kathir)

What is the recipe, the cure for this ingratitude and selfishness, and the hatred and enmity for truth and high virtues? Let's read:

9. (افلا يعلم اذا بعثر ما في القبور) Does he think he will not come to know when all that is in

the graves is raised and brought out; 10. (وحصل ما في الصدور) And all that is in the breasts is

laid open and made out? 11. (ان ربهم بهم يومئذ لخبير) Surely their Lord on that Day will be fully aware of them.

Man is a passionate self-lover. But he loves only what he imagines to be good for himself: wealth, power and the pleasures of this world. This is his nature unless he has faith which

changes his concepts, values and even his concerns. Faith changes his ingratitude to humble thankfulness. It changes his greed and miserliness to benevolence and compassion. It makes him aware of the proper values which are worthy of being the object of ambition and hard competition. Indeed these are much more exalted than money, power and mundane pleasures. (Qutb)

Hence, the final touch in the surah provides the cure for ingratitude, greed and miserliness: a firm faith in afterlife. It portrays the scene of resurrection in a way that makes man shudder, and puts his love for wealth and indulgence in worldly riches out of his mind, unshackling his soul and setting it free from earthly attachments. It is a frightening scene in which we witness the scattering about of the contents of the graves and the bringing out of closely-guarded secrets.

Does he not know what happens when this will take place? Mere awareness of all this is enough to inspire man to seek an answer and explore every avenue in search of it. On that day Allah knows them and all their affairs and secrets. God certainly knows everything at all times and in all conditions, but knowledge of 'that day' has the effect of drawing their attention. He will be knowing full well who is who, and what punishment or reward he deserves. He knows all of that they used to do, and He will compensate them for it with the most deserving reward.

The use of the word the breasts (الصدور) indicates that the judgment will not be passed only on the apparent events as for what a man actually did, but the secret motives and intentions hidden in his heart will also be brought out to make a thorough evaluation of his actions. It is clear that such full justice cannot be served in any court except in the court of Allah.

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May Allah help us to live a life pleasing to Him, having a strong faith in Him that will illuminate our whole beings; and a firm faith in resurrection and the afterlife that will help us lead a righteous life in this world adopting the highest virtues including gratefulness for His limitless favors. May Allah pardon and cover our mistakes in the day when the secrets of hearts will be laid open, and may place us, out of His infinite mercy, together with His beloved servants in the gardens of Paradise.