

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Chapter 2: AL-BAQARA (The Cow: 1-5)

Overview:

This is the first surah revealed in Madina. It is named after the word 'al-baqara' (the cow) in the 67th verse. The surah is a detailed summary of the Qur'an, and is the longest surah with 286 verses. The revelation of the surah began just after Rasulallah's emigration (called 'hijrah') from Makkah to Madinah, and was completed over almost ten years. Moreover, the first verses and the last verses (verse 281) revealed in Madinah period are believed to be part of this chapter.

The oppressive campaign against Rasulallah, his mission and his followers had intensified following the double tragedy of the year 610, the year of sorrow, in which his wife and uncle passed away. A group of Muslims had already emigrated to Abyssinia earlier in 610 to escape persecution. After this tragedy, Rasulallah had to seek an alternative home for his new faith and a new base to pursue his mission unimpeded. He first approached Thaqif tribe of Ta'if who gave him a most hostile reception. The situation suddenly changed, however, when a group from Madinah accepted Islam, and pledged allegiance of support to Rasulallah at 'Aqabah in two historical meetings in 621 and 622. Further frustrated by the news, Makkan polytheists plotted a suicide against Rasulallah. Accompanied by his close companion Abu Bakr, he migrated to Madina where Muslims found freedom to live their faith and establish their community. This incident proved to be a crucial turning point in the history of Islam. (A [map](#) of Makkah showing the route of the hijrah.)

Makkah period was a relentless struggle between believers and polytheists. The social fabric in Madinah, however, was different where there was a large Jewish population. In addition, a group of hypocrites began to appear as the Muslim community grew stronger in Madinah. They feigned acceptance of Islam merely to save their status, protect their interests, or to harm it from within. The surah therefore discusses, in general, the attitude of Israelites and hypocrites towards Islam, and issues invitations to divine guidance. Moreover, the revelation mainly instructed fundamental principles of faith and virtues in Makkah, whereas the social, cultural, economic and legal issues are also covered in Madinah period.

Reason of Revelation:

Each passage of the surah has its own reason of revelation. The particular passage is believed to be revealed soon after the emigration to praise the companions: the emigrants ('muhajirun'), the helpers ('ansar'), and certain Jewish scholars who embraced Islam in Madinah.

Style:

The style of chapters revealed in Madinah differs from the ones sent down in Makkah. The former verses are usually lengthier and more plain compared to the short and striking verses of Makkan surahs. Certain style features, such as oaths, do not appear in Madinah period either. In both cases, every surah has its own unique aura and feel that make it stand apart from the rest. The rhythm and musical pulse accord with the meaning and context of the themes of the surah. The themes around which the surah revolves are related to one another by a common thread or idea. Even though the passages are usually revealed at various occasions, they are beautifully integrated giving the feel that the whole surah is sent down as if at once, in one single occasion.

In the brief and highly informative sentences of this passage, a few rapid touches combine with the beauties of style and rhythm to a supreme effect. As a quick example, we look at the conciseness in the word order of the phrase ‘wa min ma razaqnahum yunfiqun - and [they] spend out of what We have provided for them.’ The parts of this sentence point out five conditions of alms-giving: (1) ‘min’ signifies giving only so much alms as will not cause the giver to be in need of receiving alms himself; (2) ‘razaqnahum’ denotes giving out of his own property; (3) ‘na’ implies not to place an obligation on the recipient; (4) ‘yunfiqun’ indicates giving to a person who will spend it on his livelihood; and (5) ‘razaqna’ requires giving in Allah’s name. Furthermore, ‘ma’ is left unspecified indicating that almsgiving may be given in goods, as well as in words, acts, knowledge, advice, etc.

The surah starts with three disjoint, isolated letters called ‘huruf-u muqattaa’. Several surahs in the Qur’an begin with a combination of Arabic letters in this way, and interpretations of these abstract openings vary quite widely. One common view for the wisdom behind their use is that these letters are meant to put up a challenge. They emphasize that Qur’an is composed of familiar letters of the alphabet; however its majesty and power could never be matched. It is also advanced that these letters are like ciphers that deliver encrypted messages primarily to Rasulullah as they contain many secret mysteries. Some respected scholars pointed out in their conclusions such as information about future events, and their relations to the invisible realm of existence, the overall content of the surah, and the divine names of Allah. These letters are viewed as a most brilliant miracle proving the divine origin and ownership of the book sent to an illiterate nation. Their exact and complete meanings, however, are known only to Allah and His messenger.

Noble Meaning:

1-2. (ا ل م - ذَلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ) “*Alif, Lam, Mim; this is the book wherein there is no doubt, a guidance for the God-conscious.*”

For the meaning of the letters ‘Alif, Lam Mim,’ Hamdi Yazir advances two interpretations: The letters may refer to Allah, Gabriel and Muhammad meaning that the book is revealed from Allah Almighty through Gabriel to Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him. The phrase may also form a formula to mean ‘Allahu a’alam,’ that is Allah knows best.

The evidence for the divine origin of Qur’an is implicit in total inability of the Arabs to produce the like of it, despite their proficiency and excellence in the use of their own language which is comprised of the same letters and words. There is no doubt that Qur’an is the word of Allah, and there is no doubt in the truths it contains.

The verse spells out the fear and consciousness of God (‘taqwa’) as the quality that opens the heart and mind to true guidance of Qur’an. This is the factor that causes one become receptive to divine guidance and enables him to respond to its instructions. The treasures of the Qur’an will be revealed, and its light and wisdom will pour into an alert and welcoming heart. Fear of God denotes refraining from sins in utmost reverence for God, and receiving His protection against deviations and His punishment. It is to have a sensitive conscience, a continuous concern and vigilance for pursuing the straight path in this life which is constricted by various kinds of thorns and nettles.

3. (الَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْغَيْبِ وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنْفِقُونَ) “*who believe in the unseen, establish prayer, and spend out of what We have provided for them.*”

The verse gives a description of those who are God-fearing by presenting the early model of believers in Madinah for all for future generations. The two essential qualities of this model is a profound belief in the imperceptible and dedication to worship, which is viewed as ‘faith in action.’

The word 'ghayb' is not specified and comprehends all that lies beyond the reach of human perception. It indicates the imperceptible in both the absolute and relative senses regarding the Divine Being and the rest of His creation (angels, afterlife, etc). The faith in the imperceptible opens a gate to much broader worlds beyond the physical and material, elevates man to utmost horizons and raises his consciousness to a level where the full reality may be perceived. The limits of human perception do not prevent his soul from reaching the Creator. This belief transforms the perception of the believer completely once and for all. (The linked [clip](#) shows a unit of evening prayer in Ka'bah.)

The God-conscious believer strives to observe his prayers with all external and internal conditions as instructed by Allah's messenger. Prayer is an essential pillar in the building of his religion and his character which shapes his concepts, feelings and behavior, and links him directly with God. Through this link his life assumes real meaning and a noble purpose, transcending the crude and trivial pursuits and needs of worldly living. The God-conscious is also dutiful towards the creation. He recognizes that all he possesses is a favor from the All-Merciful, and not his own making. This fills his heart with compassion for the weak and needy. He spends, at minimum, the obligatory alms (zakat) and makes voluntary donations in charity.

4. (وَالَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكَ وَمَا أُنزِلَ مِنْ قَبْلِكَ وَبِالْآخِرَةِ هُمْ يُوقِنُونَ) *“and who believe in what has been revealed to you [O Muhammad], and what was revealed before you, and they are certain of the hereafter.”*

Other qualities of the God-fearing who receives divine guidance in full include his recognition of all previous scriptures, and his unshakeable certainty in the hereafter. Man is called upon to adopt this complete and harmonious message and lead a wholesome life guided by its light.

The Muslim community is the rightful heir to the legacy of all prophets since the dawn of human life. This faith reassures of the everlasting grace of Allah and protection which He has shown by sending successive messengers preaching one and the same faith and offering the same guidance to all mankind. It purges man of bigotry and petty fanaticism. The faith in afterlife links the present life with the life to come, the beginning with the end, deed with reward. It makes man realize that he is not a useless creature, being created without a purpose and left to wither away. It comforts him by affirming that full justice is certain to come; thus inspires the believer to seek doing good with a total confidence in God's mercy and justice. It completely shapes his character and perception.

5. (أُولَئِكَ عَلَىٰ هُدًى مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ) *“it is those who are upon guidance from their Lord, and it is those who are the successful.”*

The prosperity ('falah') has many degrees and types according to the needs and aspirations of people and the degrees of their spiritual enlightenment. Some want to be saved from eternal punishment, while others desire paradise or aim at higher ranks in paradise. Still others aspire to earn Allah's pleasure alone. Making it unspecified, Qur'an points out that there are various degrees in faith, God-consciousness ('taqwa'), sincerity, purity of intention, and good deeds, and corresponding degrees in the final prosperity achieved. The route to success is clearly marked by the illustrious companions.

Notes:

Rasulullah, peace and blessing be upon him, is reported to have said "Everything has a peak, and the peak of the Qur'an is surah al-Baqarah." (A verse on the benefits of [prayer](#).)

May Allah help us reach the level of companions in certainty of faith and sincerity of worship. May peace and blessings of Allah be upon His messenger, his pure family and companions, and his noble brothers in the office of messengership.