

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Chapter 91: AL-SHAMS (The Sun)

Overview:

This surah of 15 verses was revealed in Makkah. It is 26th surah in the order of revelation, and takes its name from the word al-shams (the sun) in its first verse. The surah starts by several oaths drawing attention to certain wonders of creation. It then reminds a basic feature of humankind: being created with a disposition or capacity to do both good and evil, and explains its consequences. The surah concludes by a brief account of the destruction of Thamud tribe as a lucid example of the fate of those who choose the path of ruin.

Qur'an constantly calls man to reflect upon the nature and creation, and thus points out scientific facts in a variety of ways: sometimes directly in plain terms that requires little or no interpretation, sometimes with hints and incidental touches, sometimes using figures of speech and metaphors, and sometimes in the form of narrating the miracles of prophets, peace and blessings be upon them all. However, Qur'an is not a book of science and does not talk about scientific principles as an end in itself. The main purpose of the Qur'an is to furnish further evidences of its divine origin, draw attention to its guidance, and put main concepts in a proper framework. Furthermore, Qur'an presents such phenomena in ways that would not appear misleading to earlier generations, and would not force the men of modern ages to affirming faith without exercising their free will.

The established principles of modern science are in complete conformity with Qur'an, without a single exception or a contradiction. It is more than likely that there are many other indications in the Qur'an that we do not understand with our current level of knowledge. It is expected that the science will evolve to unveil other meanings of the Qur'an in upcoming years. Badiuzzaman formulated this observation when he stated that "As time grows older, Qur'an gets younger."

Reason of Revelation:

There is no specific reason of revelation reported on this surah. However, both the content and the style indicate that it was revealed when opposition against Islam grew intense in Makkah.

Style:

Qur'an instigates the mind of the reader, raises his curiosity and opens new horizons in front of him. Qur'an does not give a detailed description of natural phenomena and scientific principles, but places pointers on them and provides keys leading to understanding of their reality. Qur'an is always gentle on the minds of the common people at the same time as it nurtures the inquisitive minds. The fact that this gentle and succinct language comprises vast meanings for the motivated reader is a miraculous aspect of the Qur'an. It makes use of the subtle features of Arabic language, and employs all nuances of its vocabulary and word combinations to express multiple layers of broad meanings. Everybody benefits from the Qur'an, from a shepherd to an authority in sciences, at the level of his/her understanding.

This surah maintains the same rhyme in all its verses and keeps the same musical beat throughout. Typical of the revelations in Makkah period, the verses are short and very powerful. Many forms of literary arts and artistic styles are employed, some of which are unique to Qur'an. It makes use of oaths to stress meanings, and presents similes, antilogies, agreement and parallelism in the most exquisite form. The intonation of each word fits perfectly with the content of its verse. Just as Allah's creation is beautiful and miraculous, His divine words are also beautiful and miraculous both in multiple layers of broad meanings as well as in their matchless composition and styles. Neither one can ever be imitated.

This surah contains seven oaths on seven wonders of creation. Scholars advanced various explanations for the function of Qur'anic oaths. First of all, Qur'an was revealed in clear Arabic, and it was customary for Arabs to reinforce their statements by means of oaths. Moreover, the oaths point out to high values and great benefits of the objects by which Qur'an has sworn, in respect of both religious and worldly matters. The oaths instigate man's curiosity, draw his attention to these objects and natural phenomena, and invites him to contemplate them and appreciate their value and purpose of their creation. In addition, the oath furnishes evidence for the statement it is sworn for. In other words the oath is a mode of presenting proofs in view of the evidence those objects furnish for the statement. That is, what was sworn by is meant to serve as a witness to the truth of what is sworn for. Finally, it is worthwhile to point out that the use of oaths are peculiar to Makkah period, and it tends to be less frequent in later revelations.

Here in this surah, the oaths are sworn by contrasted beings which serve as a framework leading up to an assertion of the contrast between the one who purifies his soul and the one who corrupts it. The antilogy formed by these contrasted beings (sun and moon, day and night, heaven and earth, and wickedness and piety) is most pleasant. The agreement parallelism between verses 3 and 4 in the sentences "*the day as it reveals it*" and "*the night as it enshrouds it*" has a captivating beauty. A similar relation exists in verses 9 and 10 between the sentences "*he is indeed prosperous who has grown it in purity,*" and "*he is indeed lost who has corrupted it.*"

Noble Meaning:

1-2. (وَالشَّمْسِ وَضُحَاهَا - وَالْقَمَرِ إِذَا تَلَاهَا) "*By the sun and its brightness, and the moon as it follows it*"

The surah opens with an inspiring oath by the sun and its light. It also specifies the time when the sun rises above the horizon, when it is the most beautiful. The mid-morning is a time of refreshing in winter, and is a time when the atmosphere is just mild and fresh before the blazing heat of midday sets in the summer. Our familiarity with the sun and its light makes us tend to overlook its beauty and function. This hint alerts us anew to this magnificent daily spectacle.

The second oath is by the moon as she follows the sun. When the sun sets, the moon starts spreading her beautiful and clear light. One can almost feel the hand of the Maker beyond this perfect creation on a clear night. In addition, there is a clear reference here to the movement of the moon in the solar system exactly as the modern day science explains it. The moon rotates around the earth, and together they circulate around the sun. The sun continues its journey in its orbit around the center of the milky way galaxy, and the moon follows it ceaselessly. (A short clip on the sun, its light and the moon: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOErr4xntHE&NR=1>)

3-4. (وَالنَّهَارِ إِذَا جَلَّاهَا - وَاللَّيْلِ إِذَا يَغْشَاهَا) “*And the day as it reveals it (the sun), and the night as it enshrouds it*”

Qur'an swears by the day as it reveals the sun, or the earth. The possessive pronoun may be interpreted in two ways, both of which are true. The state has been described saying that the day reveals the sun, because the day actually signifies the sun's coming out above the horizon. The verse calls for contemplation about the function of the day and its effect on human life. The same applies to the oath in the next verse by the night which veils it. This is the opposite of what happens during the day. Night time is like a screen that covers and hides everything. It leaves its own impressions, and its impact on human life is no less important than that of the day time. The alternative description that night covers the sun is because the night signifies its hiding behind the horizon. (A clip about day and night: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCyTNpcDTUM>)

5-6. (وَالسَّمَاءِ وَمَا بَنَاهَا - وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا طَحَاهَا) “*and the heaven and that Who has built it, and the earth and that Who has spread it.*”

In these verses the Arabic word 'ma' has been used. A section of the commentators has taken it as an infinitive, and interpreted these verses to mean “by the heaven and its construction, and by the earth and its being spread out.” Others thought it means “who” and they interpret the sentences to mean: “who established the heaven, and who spread out the earth.” It is indeed but the divine power that holds this structure together as emphasized elsewhere in the Qur'an.

Qur'an is calling the reader to contemplate. Even though we are uncertain of the exact nature of heaven and its operation, what we see above us does bear the idea of building and construction because it looks as a firm and solid whole. The reference to its construction also brings to mind the function of sky as a protecting roof built over the earth. The oath then includes the earth and its spreading which means making its surface suitable for settlement and life. Human and animal life would not have been possible had the earth not been spread out. The surah reminds us of the power the mercy of Allah who brought this about.

7-8. (وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا - فَأَنفَسَهَا فَجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا) “*and [by] the soul and He who proportioned it, and inspired it [with discernment of] its wickedness and its righteousness.*”

The surah moves on to state the basic truth about man, and relates this truth to the various phenomena of the universe, for man is one of the most remarkable wonders in this harmonious creation. Besides his miraculous physical structure endowed with the senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell, Allah equipped man with the faculties of thinking and reasoning, imagination, memory, free will, etc. In addition, balancing also means that man was not created a sinner by birth and a criminal by instinct but was created on the right and sound nature.

The basis of the Islamic concept of human psychology is outlined in these and the following verses. God has created man with a duality of nature and ability, with two ingredients in his make-up: earth's clay and God's spirit, with dual tendencies to both the good and the evil. Every species of animals has been given inspirational knowledge according to its needs. Man, being a rational and moral being, is also endowed with the ability to discriminate between good and evil. The divine messages serve to awaken his innate ability, and help him take the chosen way.

9-10. (قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ رَزَّاهَا - وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسَّاهَا) *“He is indeed prosperous who has grown it in purity, and he is indeed lost who has corrupted it.”*

This is the statement for which the oaths have been sworn by the seven things in the above verses. Here, the word ‘tazkiyah’ means to purify, develop and cultivate, and the word ‘tadsiyah’ means to suppress, conceal, seduce and lead astray.

In addition to his innate ability, man is equipped with freedom of choice which determines his line of action. Hence, he is responsible for his actions and decisions. Humans resemble seeds, for in each of us is the potential to engender and attain perfection. If we germinate the seed of our potential under the ‘soil of faith’ with the ‘water of worship,’ we will grow into an eternal, majestic tree, the branches of which extend into eternity. We will yield fruit of virtue in this world and eternal happiness in the next world. We will be favored in Paradise with infinite perfection and countless blessings. This is the direct fulfillment of Allah’s will. If man chooses to conceal his innate ability and pays no heed to the divine message, this will rot away his potential and will lead him to ruin.

There is a discussion about the subject of these two verses. Is it Allah who purifies or leads astray, or the man? The conclusion is that man strives for purifying himself, but depends on Allah's grace and favor alone for its attainment. There are authentic traditions that attest to this conclusion reporting that Rasulallah implored in his supplication by saying “O Allah, grant my self its piety and purify it. You alone are the best to purify it. You alone are its Guardian and Master.” On the other hand, when man is resolved on iniquity and evil, Allah deprives him of His grace and leaves him alone to suppress and bury his self under the heap of filth he likes.

Notes:

It is written in some sufi books that reciting this surah 41 times would protect the believer from troubles. It is also said that the one who reads this surah often becomes prosperous.

In an authentic tradition Jabir reported that Rasulallah recommended recitation of this surah in the night prayer besides the chapters the Night (al-Layl) and the Most High (al-A’la).

Finally, let me point out that in sufi commentaries, the surah is interpreted symbolically in a different context. The sun is a symbol that represents the spirit, moon represents the heart. The day represents the illumination of the heart and the darkness of the night is a symbol of effect of carnal self. The heaven represents animal soul and the earth is the body. The rest of the surah may be interpreted this way. The Qur’an being the word of Allah has multiple layers of meanings, all of which may be accurate as long as the meanings are derived following the principles of Qur’anic sciences.

(Here is clip that sums up our translations: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMAu4LUDQjY>)