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A Glance at Wide Horizons

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

Alif. Lām. Mīm. Rā. These are verses of the Book. That which is revealed to you by your Lord is the Truth, yet most people will not believe. (1)

It is God who raised the heavens without any support that you could see, and established Himself on the Throne. And He it is who has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each pursuing its course for a set term. He ordains all things. He makes plain His revelations so that you may firmly believe that you will certainly be meeting your Lord. (2)

It is He who has spread out the earth and placed upon it firm mountains and rivers, and created on it two sexes of every type of fruit, and caused the night to cover the day. In all these there are signs for people who think. (3)

الْمَرْ تِلْكَ ءَايَاتُ الْكِتَابِ وَالَّذِي أُنزِلَ
إِلَيْكَ مِنْ رَبِّكَ الْحَقُّ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ
النَّاسِ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١﴾

اللَّهُ الَّذِي رَفَعَ السَّمَوَاتِ بِغَيْرِ عَمَدٍ تَرَوْنَهَا
ثُمَّ أَسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ وَسَخَّرَ
الشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ كُلٌّ يَجْرِي لِأَجَلٍ
مُّسَمًّى يُدَبِّرُ الْأَمْرَ يُفَصِّلُ الْآيَاتِ
لَعَلَّكُمْ بِلِقَاءِ رَبِّكُمْ تُوقِنُونَ ﴿٢﴾

وَهُوَ الَّذِي مَدَّ الْأَرْضَ وَجَعَلَ فِيهَا
رَوَاسِيَ وَأَنْهَارًا وَمِنْ كُلِّ الثَّمَرَاتِ جَعَلَ
فِيهَا زَوْجَيْنِ اثْنَيْنِ يُغْشَى اللَّيْلَ النَّهَارَ إِنَّ
فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿٣﴾

And there are on earth adjoining tracts of land; and vineyards, and fields of grains and date-palms, growing in clusters or non-clustered. [All] are irrigated by the same water; yet some of them are favoured above others with regard to the food [they provide]. In all this there are signs for people who use their reason. (4)

But if you are amazed, amazing, too, is their saying: 'What! After we have become dust, shall we be raised [to life] in a new act of creation?' These are the ones who deny their Lord. They are the ones who carry their own shackles around their necks; and they are the ones who are destined for the fire wherein they will abide. (5)

They ask you to hasten evil rather than good, although exemplary punishments have indeed come to pass before their time. Your Lord always extends forgiveness to people despite their wrongdoing. Your Lord is certainly severe in retribution. (6)

Yet the unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord?' But you are only a warner.

وَفِي الْأَرْضِ قِطْعٌ مُتَجَبِّرَاتٌ وَجَنَّاتٌ مِّنْ^٤
أَعْنَابٍ وَزُرْعٌ وَنَخِيلٌ صِنَوَانٌ وَغَيْرُهُ
صِنَوَانٍ يُسْقَى بِمَاءٍ وَاحِدٍ وَنُفِضِلُ
بَعْضَهَا عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ فِي الْأَكْلِ ۚ إِنَّ فِي
ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٤﴾

﴿٥﴾ وَإِنْ تَعْجَبَ فَعَجَبٌ قَوْلُهُمْ أَإِذَا كُنَّا
تُرَابًا أَعْنَا لَفِي خَلْقٍ جَدِيدٍ ۗ أُولَٰئِكَ
الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِرَبِّهِمْ ۗ وَأُولَٰئِكَ الْأَغْلَلُ
فِي أَعْنَاقِهِمْ ۗ وَأُولَٰئِكَ أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ ۗ هُمْ
فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ ﴿٥﴾

وَيَسْتَعْجِلُونَكَ بِالسَّيِّئَةِ قَبْلَ الْحَسَنَةِ وَقَدْ
خَلَتْ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمُ الْمَثَلَتُ ۗ وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَذُو
مَغْفِرَةٍ لِّلنَّاسِ عَلَىٰ ظُلْمِهِمْ ۗ وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ
لَشَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ ﴿٦﴾ وَيَقُولُ

الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَوْلَا نُزِّلَ عَلَيْهِ آيَةٌ مِّنْ
رَّبِّهِ ۗ إِنَّمَا أَنْتَ مُنذِرٌ ۗ وَلِكُلِّ قَوْمٍ هَادٍ

Every community have [their] guide. (7)

God knows what every female bears, and by how much the wombs may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase. With Him everything has its definite measure. (8)

He knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception and all that anyone may witness. He is the Great One, the Most High. (9)

It is all alike [to Him] whether any of you speaks in secret or aloud, whether he seeks to hide under the cover of the night or walks openly in the light of day. (10)

Each has guardian angels before him and behind him, who watch him by God's command. Indeed God does not change a people's conditions unless they first change what is in their hearts. When God wills people to suffer some misfortune, none can avert it. Besides Him, they have none to protect them. (11)

It is He who displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope,

اللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مَا تَحْمِلُ كُلُّ أُنْثَىٰ وَمَا تَغِيضُ الْأَرْحَامُ وَمَا تَزْدَادُ ۗ وَكُلُّ شَيْءٍ عِنْدَهُ بِمِقْدَارٍ ﴿٨﴾

عَلِمَ الْغَيْبِ وَالشَّهَادَةِ الْكَبِيرِ الْمُتَعَالِ ﴿٩﴾

سَوَاءٌ مِنْكُمْ مَن أَسَرَ الْقَوْلَ وَمَن جَهَرَ بِهِ ۚ وَمَن هُوَ مُسْتَخْفٍ بِاللَّيْلِ وَسَارِبٌ بِالنَّهَارِ ﴿١٠﴾

لَهُ مَعْقَبَاتٌ مِّن بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ وَمِن خَلْفِهِ يَحْفَظُونَهُ مِمَّنْ أَمَرَ اللَّهُ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُغَيِّرُ مَا بِقَوْمٍ حَتَّىٰ يُغَيِّرُوا مَا بِأَنْفُسِهِمْ ۗ وَإِذَا أَرَادَ اللَّهُ بِقَوْمٍ سُوءًا فَلَا مَرَدَّ لَهُ ۗ وَمَا لَهُم مِّن دُونِهِ ۚ مِن وَالٍ ﴿١١﴾

هُوَ الَّذِي يُرِيكُمُ الْبَرْقَ خَوْفًا وَطَمَعًا وَيُنشِئُ السَّحَابَ الثِّقَالَ ﴿١٢﴾

and originates the heavy clouds. (12)

And the thunder extols His limitless glory and praises Him, and so do the angels, in awe of Him. He hurls the thunderbolts to smite with them whom He wills. Yet they stubbornly argue about God. His might is both stern and wise. (13)

To Him is due the prayer aiming at the Truth. Those whom people invoke beside God cannot respond to them in any way. They are just like a man who stretches his open hands towards water, [hoping] that it will come to his mouth; but it will never reach it. The prayer of those without faith is nothing but wandering in grievous error. (14)

To God prostrate themselves, willingly or unwillingly, all those who are in the heavens and on earth, as do their very shadows, morning and evening. (15)

Say: 'Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth?' Say: [It is] God.' Say: 'Why, then, do you take for your protectors, instead of Him, others who have no power to cause either benefit or harm even to themselves?' Say: 'Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Or is the depth of

وَيُسَبِّحُ الرَّعْدُ بِحَمْدِهِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ مِنْ
خِيفَتِهِ وَيُرْسِلُ الصَّوَاعِقَ فَيُصِيبُ بِهَا
مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَهُمْ يُجَادِلُونَ فِي اللَّهِ وَهُوَ
شَدِيدُ الْحَالِ ﴿١٣﴾

لَهُ دَعْوَةُ الْحَقِّ وَالَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِنْ
دُونِهِ لَا يَسْتَجِيبُونَ لَهُمْ بِشَيْءٍ إِلَّا
كَبْسِطٍ كَفَيْهِ إِلَى الْمَاءِ لِيَبْلُغَ فَاهُ وَمَا هُوَ
بِيَبْلُغُهُ وَمَا دُعَاءُ الْكَافِرِينَ إِلَّا فِي ضَلَالٍ
﴿١٤﴾

وَلِلَّهِ يَسْجُدُ مَنْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
طَوْعًا وَكَرْهًا وَظِلَّلُهُمْ بِالْغُدُوِّ وَالْآصَالِ
﴿١٥﴾

قُلْ مَنْ رَبُّ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ قُلِ اللَّهُ
قُلْ أَفَاتَّخَذْتُمْ مِنْ دُونِهِ أَوْلِيَاءَ لَا
يَمْلِكُونَ لِأَنْفُسِهِمْ نَفْعًا وَلَا ضَرًّا قُلْ
هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الْأَعْمَى وَالْبَصِيرُ أَمْ هَلْ

darkness equal to light?

Or do they assign to God partners that have created the like of His creation, so that both creations appear to them to be similar? Say: 'God is the Creator of all things. He is the One who has power over all things.' (16)

He sends down water from the sky, so that riverbeds flow according to their measure, and the torrent bears a swelling foam. Likewise, from what people smelt in the fire to make ornaments or utensils rises similar foam. Thus does God illustrate truth and falsehood. The scum is cast away, while that which is of benefit to mankind abides on earth. Thus does God set forth His parables. (17)

For those who respond to their Lord is a rich reward. As for those who do not respond to Him, should they have all that the earth contains, and twice as much, they would gladly offer it for their ransom. Theirs shall be an awful reckoning, and hell shall be their abode, an evil resting-place! (18)

تَسْتَوِي الظُّلُمَاتُ وَالنُّورُ

أَمْ جَعَلُوا لِلَّهِ شُرَكَاءَ خَلَقُوا كَخَلْقِهِ
فَتَشَبَهَ الْخَلْقُ عَلَيْهِمْ قُلِ اللَّهُ خَلِقُ كُلِّ
شَيْءٍ وَهُوَ الْوَاحِدُ الْقَهَّارُ ﴿١٦﴾

أَنْزَلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً فَسَالَتْ أَوْدِيَةٌ
بِقَدَرِهَا فَاحْتَمَلَ السَّيْلُ زَبَدًا رَابِيًا
وَمِمَّا يُوقِدُونَ عَلَيْهِ فِي النَّارِ ابْتِغَاءَ حَلِيبَةٍ
أَوْ مَتَاعٍ زَبَدٌ مِثْلَهُ كَذَلِكَ يَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ
الْحَقَّ وَالْبَاطِلَ فَأَمَّا الزَّبَدُ فَيَذْهَبُ
جُفَاءً وَأَمَّا مَا يَنْفَعُ النَّاسَ فَيَمْكُثُ فِي
الْأَرْضِ كَذَلِكَ يَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ ﴿١٧﴾

لِلَّذِينَ اسْتَجَابُوا لِرَبِّهِمْ الْحُسْنَىٰ
وَالَّذِينَ لَمْ يَسْتَجِيبُوا لَهُ لَوْ أَنَّ
لَهُمْ مَا فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا وَمِثْلَهُ مَعَهُ
لَافْتَدَوْا بِهِ أُولَئِكَ لَهُمْ سُوءُ الْحِسَابِ
وَمَا أُولَهُمْ جَهَنَّمَ وَنَسِ الْمِهَادِ ﴿١٨﴾

Overview

The *sūrah* opens with a basic issue of faith, namely the revelation of God's book, the Qur'ān, and the truth it contains. This formulates the foundation over which all the other issues of faith are built, including those of the oneness of God, belief in the hereafter, and the need to do good in this life. All these branch out from the central point of believing that the One who gives all orders is God, and that the Qur'ān is His revelation to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him).

"Alif. Lām. Mīm. Rā. *These are verses of the Book.*" (Verse 1) This is one way of reading the first statement, but it may also be interpreted as, 'These are signs that prove the truth of this Book.' They are clear evidence that it is a revelation from God. The very fact that it is composed of the same material as these separate letters, *alif lām, mīm, rā*, is sufficient proof that it comes from God, and is not the work of any creature, human or non-human.

"*That which is revealed to you by your Lord is the Truth.*" (Verse 1) That is the real and pure truth which is never coloured with any falsehood. It admits no doubt. These letters are signs that it is revealed by God, and what comes from God must be undoubtedly true. "*Yet most people will not believe.*" (Verse 1) They neither believe that it is divine revelation, nor do they accept the major issues that result from believing in revelation, such as belief in God's oneness, submission to Him alone, resurrection on the Day of Judgement, and the need to do good in this life.

Scenes of Magnificent Splendour

The *sūrah's* opening sums up its theme, and points out all the issues that it discusses. It moves on to show some aspects of God's unlimited power and some of the spectacular aspects in the universe which indicate God's wisdom and elaborate planning. They clearly indicate that such wisdom requires that there should be revelation to put the issues clearly to human beings, and resurrection so that people are made to account for their deeds. God's infinite power means that He can resurrect people so that they return to Him, the Creator who has originated them and originated the universe before them.

The superb, divine paintbrush begins to draw some of the great universal images, touching on the heavens and on the earth, and a few aspects of the world we live in and life itself. It then wonders at those who deny resurrection, having looked at these great signs. Such people even hasten the infliction of God's punishment on

themselves, demanding, at the same time, that other signs are given to them: *"It is God who raised the heavens without any support that you could see, and established Himself on the Throne. And He it is who has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each pursuing its course for a set term. He ordains all things. He makes plain His revelations so that you may firmly believe that you will certainly be meeting your Lord."* (Verse 2)

The heavens, or the skies, whatever they indicate to people in different ages, are there to be seen by all. They provide an infinite expanse which strikes us with awe should we contemplate them for even a short while. They are elevated, 'raised without support', exposed so that we can see them. This is the first spectacle of the universe to raise human consciousness. For man immediately realizes that no one can raise the heavens without support, or even with support, except God. The most that people themselves can raise, with or without support, are simply the buildings that we erect for our purposes. We then speak of the skill, mastery, artistic touches and the perfection that go into raising such buildings, heedless of the heavens above us, raised without support, and the great power and perfection that lies behind their creation. It is impossible for human beings even to imagine such power and perfection.

The *sūrah* then moves from this awesome scene to the world that lies beyond the reach of human perception: *"And established Himself on the Throne."* (Verse 2) If the heavens are high and great, then the Throne is higher and infinitely greater. This is indeed the ultimate height, drawn in the usual manner of the Qur'ān to demonstrate relative dimensions to enable human beings to understand. This is another stroke from the same remarkable paintbrush. It adds a dimension of absolute height next to the heights we see.[§]

The *sūrah* then moves to the concept of making the sun and the moon subservient. The great height that people see, with all its exhilarating beauty and breathtaking greatness, is all subservient to the will of God, the Great, the Almighty.

We would like to pause a little here to reflect on the parallels drawn in this scene. We see a great height in our visible world contrasted to a height in the world beyond. We also find an exaltation that is associated with height, contrasted with the notion of subservience to God's will. We also see the sun and the moon providing contrast in kind and time: one is a star shining during the day and the other a planet showing its beauty at night.

We move on to find that exaltation and subservience are coupled with God's elaborate planning and wisdom: *"He it is who has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each pursuing its course for a set term."* (Verse 2) There are definite limits

[§] For further discussion on the *Istiḥā'ah* attribute, please refer to section 1.1 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān*.

and well-defined laws that apply to the sun and the moon as they move in their annual and daily courses, and as they follow their respective orbits, not moving an inch beyond them. Indeed the sun and the moon continue to pursue their courses to a time limit that has been appointed by God.

"He ordains all things." (Verse 2) All matters are ordained according to elaborate planning which includes the subservience of the sun and the moon. This planning applies to the entire universe with all its celestial bodies that pursue their courses for a definite time. There can be no denial of the greatness of this planning and the great wisdom that lies behind it.

Elaborate and Coherent Scenes

It is part of His planning that *"He makes plain His revelations."* (Verse 2) The term used in the Qur'ān for 'revelations', *āyāt*, also means 'signs'. Thus He bestows His revelations and places His signs in their perfect order, showing each at the right time and for a definite purpose, *"so that you may firmly believe that you will certainly be meeting your Lord"* (Verse 2) When you see these signs clearly pointing to the truth of creation, indicating also what lies beyond them of great signs in the universe, all created by God, and described plainly and clearly in the Qur'ān, in a way which speaks volumes of God's ability and elaborate planning, you will begin to think that your return to the Creator after this first life is inevitable. It is then that the deeds of human beings will be assessed and their reward determined. That is part of the planning that is absolutely perfect and wise.

This inimitable imagery then moves from the heavens to the earth to depict its wider view: *"It is He who has spread out the earth and placed upon it firm mountains and rivers, and created on it two sexes of every type of fruit, and caused the night to cover the day. In all these there are signs for people who think."* (Verse 3)

The main lines here are the spreading out of the earth so that its expanse comes into view. Whatever its total shape, it is spread out to give the appearance of broadness. This is the first aspect. Then the line of firm mountains is drawn, followed by that of flowing rivers to complete the broad lines of the main view. These are made both parallel and contrasting, for they are complemented with a total picture of what the earth contains and what life in it holds. The first refers to the plants that come out of the earth: *'It is He who... has created on it two sexes of every type of fruit,'* while the other is represented in the phenomena of night and day: *'and caused the night to cover the day.'* (Verse 3)

The first of these scenes includes a fact that has only recently been fathomed by scientific research. That is that all living creatures, and plants among them, have a male and female. It used to be thought that plants have no male sex, but it was

recently discovered that one- sex plants carry the male and female organs within the same flower, or the same stem. This fact increases the effect of the scene as it urges us to contemplate the secrets of the universe after considering only its apparent aspects.

The other scene speaks of the succession of night and day, with one overwhelming the other in a never-failing system. This invites us to think more carefully about the laws of nature. The arrival of the night after the departure of the day, and the break of dawn when the night begins to move away are phenomena that we are familiar with. Familiarity may make them less striking, but only a little contemplation is needed for them to appear before us as infinitely marvellous. We only need to feel them as if it were all happening for the first time. Moreover, the very elaborate system that helps all celestial bodies move in their respective orbits, without fail, invites us to think of the power that governs all this and ensures that it continues to function with perfect accuracy. *"In all these there are signs for people who think."* (Verse 3)

We should pause again here to reflect on the contrasting features in the scene before moving to the next one. There is a contrast for example between the firm mountains that appear well established in their positions, and the flowing rivers; between the male and female in all fruits and trees; between the night and the day; and then between the earth and the sky. These last two scenes complement each other in the overall panoramic view of the universe.

As we move along with the *sūrah*, we see this highly creative paintbrush delivering further detail of the scene of the face of the earth: *"And there are on earth adjoining tracts of land; and vineyards, and fields of grains and date palms, growing in clusters or non-clustered. [All] are irrigated by the same water; yet some of them are favoured above others with regard to the food [they provide]. In all this there are signs for people who use their reason."* (Verse 4)

Many of us pass by these scenes not looking carefully at what we see, until our souls go back to their nature and re-establish contact with the universe of which they constitute a part. We stand aside to contemplate it before reuniting with it. *"And there are on earth adjoining tracts of land,"* with different characteristics. Had they been the same, they would have constituted a single piece or tract. But they are 'tracts', some of which are fertile and some which are not; some are rocky and some barren. In each type there are grades and colours. Some are built up, while others have subsided; some are cultivated while others abandoned; some are well-watered and others arid, etc. Yet they are all next to each other.

Then we are given yet further detail: vineyards, fields of grains and palm trees. They represent three different types of plant: the creeping grape tree, and the high, upright date-palm and the ordinary grain plants, shrubs of beans, roses, etc. The

picture is one of immense variety and colour.

The date-palms may grow in clusters or stand alone. Some date trees have one stem and others have two or more shooting from a single tree. All these are *"irrigated by the same water,"* and have the same soil, but the fruits they give taste differently: *"Yet some of them are favoured above others with regard to the food they provide."* (Verse 4) Who other than the Creator, the wise planner, can do all this? Who of us has not found different tastes in fruits from the same piece of land? Yet how many have looked at this aspect to which the Qur'ān draws our attention? It is with touches like these that the Qur'ān remains ever new, because it enhances our feelings and the way these are influenced by what we see around us. These are too numerous to be fully contemplated within the lifetime of any one person. In fact they are too many for all mankind to fathom. Hence the Qur'ānic comment: *"In all this there are signs for people who use their reason."* (Verse 4)

Once more the *sūrah* draws a contrast between the adjoining tracts of land that differ from one another. The date trees can be single or clustered. Moreover, tastes, plants and fruit are all of a rich variety.

The *sūrah* starts with such panoramic scenes from the vast universe, but then speaks of people who remain uninspired by all these signs around them, visible in every aspect of creation. Their hearts and minds remain oblivious to the fact that behind all these marvels lies the great power of the Creator. This is because their minds are in chains and their hearts bound. They cannot contemplate the vast universal scenes around them: *"But if you are amazed, amazing, too, is their saying: 'What! After we have become dust, shall we be raised [to life] in a new act of creation?' These are the ones who deny their Lord. They are the ones who carry their own shackles around their necks; and they are the ones who are destined for the fire wherein they will abide."* (Verse 5)

It is quite amazing that after all these signs people should wonder: *'What! After we have become dust, shall we be raised to life in a new act of creation?'* (Verse 5) The One who has created the great universe and manages its affairs in meticulous fashion is certainly able to resurrect human beings in a new act of creation. But such people refuse to believe this, lacking faith in their Lord who created them. What holds them back are the chains and shackles that restrain their hearts and minds. Just as they are shackled in this life, so will they be in the life to come. Their punishment will only be completed when they are thrown in the fire of hell where they will abide for a very long time. They have switched off all the faculties God has given to people and honoured them on their account. They have also accepted a low position in this life. This earns them an even lower life in the hereafter, simply because they have lived their first life making no use of their faculties, feelings and emotions.