Sūrat Āl īmrān

Verses 1–6

In the name of God, the All-Merciful, the Compassionate.
1. Alif lām mīm.
2. God, there is no god but He, the Everliving, the Eternal Sovereign.
3. He sent down the Book to you with the truth, confirming [the scriptures] that were before it. He sent down the Torah and the Gospel
4. aforetime, a guidance to humankind, and sent down the Criterion. Surely, those who reject faith in the signs of God shall have terrible torment, for God is All-Mighty, dispensing retribution.
5. Surely, nothing in the earth or in heaven is hidden from God!
6. It is He who forms you in the womb as He wills; there is no god but He, the All-Mighty, the All-Wise.

Verses 1–2

The first two verses of this sura have already been examined [see commentary on Q. 2:1 and 2:255 in vol. I, pp. 56–62 and 247–52]. All six verses, however, are regarded by commentators as a statement of God’s oneness, sovereignty, and power.

Verse 3

Commentators have raised a number of issues concerning this verse.
Tabari, like most classical tafsīr masters, reads the verse in the context of the theological debate between the Prophet and the

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Christian savants of Najran. He writes: "God, exalted is He, says, 'O Muḥammad, your Lord and the Lord of Jesus and of all things, is the Lord who sent down the Book to you.'" By the Book He means the Qur'an. By the phrase "with the truth" He means "the truth concerning that in which the people of the Torah and the Gospel have disagreed, and concerning the things disputed with you by the Christians of Najran, as well as all the people of association [shirk]" (Tabari, VI, p. 160).

Ibn Kathir reads the phrase "with the truth" [bil-ḥaqq] as "in truth." He says: "He sent down the Qur'an to you, O Muḥammad, in truth, in that there is no doubt or uncertainty concerning it. Rather it is revealed by God, 'He sent it down in His foreknowledge. Angels are witnesses to that, and God is sufficient witness' (Q. 4:166)." Ibn Kathir further argues that the Qur'an confirms the scriptures which were revealed to previous prophets. "They confirm the Qur'an in the things which they announced concerning it in ancient times. The Qur'an, likewise, confirms these scriptures in that it has fulfilled the reports which they contained concerning God's promise to send Muḥammad as an apostle and reveal the tremendous Qur'an to him" (Ibn Kathir, II, p. 3).

Zamakhshari discusses the two forms of the verb nazala: nazzala and anzala ("caused to come down" and "sent down"), as used in this verse, to denote God's sending the Qur'an, the Torah, and the Gospel. He argues: "If you ask why it is said, 'He caused to come down [nazzala] the Book' and 'He sent down [anzala] the Torah and the Gospel,' I say it is because the Qur'an came down in successive portions, while the two previous scriptures each came down at one time" (Zamakhshari, I, p. 335). This argument is based on the different emphases in the two forms of the verb nazala. Nazzala is the intensive form of the verb, which could imply frequency of action.

Qurṭubi accepts this view and presents similar arguments in its support. He discusses at some length, however, the lexical meanings of the terms tawrāt [torah] and injil [gospel]. "The word tawrāt," he writes, "means luminosity and light. It is derived from the verb waraya, meaning to kindle fire with two sticks. It is also said that the word tawrāt is derived from the tawriyah, which means disclosing a thing and concealing another. This is to say that the Torah consists mostly of hints and allusions without elaboration or clarification. This is the view of Mu'arrij. But most people accept

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5. A grammarian and genealogist, d. 195/810.

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the previous view. This is because of God’s saying ‘Thus have We
given Moses and Aaron the Criterion (furqān), a light and a re-
membrance for the God-fearing’ [Q. 21: 48]—that is, the Torah. The
word injīl is derived from the word najīl, meaning asl root or source).
The injīl is, therefore, the source of certain branches of knowledge
and wise sayings. It is also said that the word injīl is derived from
the verb najāla, meaning to derive or draw out. Thus from the Injīl
are derived branches of knowledge and wisdom. The word najīl
also means the water which spurts out of the earth. Thus [the Gospel] is
called Injīl because God has brought forth through it truth that was
long gone and forgotten. It has also been said that the word injīl is
derived from the word najīl, which also means breadth. Thus the
Gospel is called Injīl because it is a broad source of light and guid-
ance. Still another view is that injīl is derived from tanājul, which
means dissension or disagreement (tanāzu), because people have
been in disagreement concerning it. Another view is that an
injīl is any book inscribed with many lines.” In a mistaken reference to the
Greek evangelion, Qurtubi adds one further explanation. “It has also
been said that both the words tawrāt and injīl are derived from the
Syriac. Thus, according to [the well-known traditionist] al-Tha’alibi,
the injīl in Syriac is inkilyūn.” He then asserts that “it is possible to
call the Qur’an injīl also. It is related in the story of Moses’ munāiāt
[colloquy] with God that he said, ‘O Lord, I see in the tablets [of the
Torah] people whose anājīl [plural of injīl] are in their breasts. Let
them be my community!’ God answered him saying, ‘They shall be the
community of Aḥmad [an alternative form of the name Muḥammad].’ By the
anājīl God meant the Qur’an” [Qurtubi, IV, pp. 5–6].
Rāzī sees in these verses a divine theological proof. He says:

“You should know that the opening of this sura has a sub-
tle and marvelous narrative. This is because those Chris-
tians who disputed with the Messenger of God were told,
as it were, ‘either you dispute with him concerning knowl-
edge of God, or concerning prophethood. If the dispute con-
cerns knowledge of God, and that you argue that He has a
son, and that Muhammad argues that He has no son,
Muḥammad is in the right as can be proven by incontro-
vertible rational arguments. This is because it has been estab-
lished beyond doubt that God is Everliving, Eternal Sov-
eign. Moreover, He who is Everliving, Eternal Sovereign
cannot rationally be said to have a son. If, on the other
hand, the dispute is concerning [Muḥammad’s] propheth-
hood, this, too, is unsound. This is because God sent down
the Qur’an to Muḥammad in the same manner known to you in which He sent down the Torah and the Gospel to Moses and Jesus. This was nothing but a miracle, which is clearly established in his case. How could then his prophethood be subject to debate?”

Rāzi then presents two brief discussions: one regarding theology, which essentially reproduces his arguments on the Throne Verse of sura 2; the other deals with prophethood. He concludes the argument for God’s oneness, transcendence, and omnipotence by asserting, “Thus God’s saying ‘the Everliving, the Eternal Sovereign’ encompasses all possible proofs against the trinitarian view of the Christians.”

Rāzi goes on:

“As for the second discussion regarding prophethood, it should be observed that God has set the argument in the best and most excellent manner. This is because He says, ‘He sent down the Book to you with the truth,’ which may be taken as a claim. God then establishes a proof in support of this claim.”

Rāzi then argues on God’s behalf with the Jews and Christians:

“You agree with us that ‘God had sent down the Torah and the Gospel aforetime as a guidance to humankind.’ Thus you know that the Torah and the Gospel are two divine books, and this is because God had linked their revelation with that of the Criterion (Furqān) as the miracle which sets the distinction between the views of those who are in the right and those who are in the wrong. The distinction between the true and false claim, when established through this miracle [i.e., the Qur’an as the Criterion], then the distinction is necessarily valid. Furthermore, if the Torah and the Gospel were revealed by God, so too is the Qur’an, which is the miraculous Criterion (Furqān) sent down by God. Thus since they all share in the manner of revelation, then either all must be denied, which is the view of the [Hindu] Brahmans [Barāhimah], or must all be accepted, as Muslims believe. But to accept some and reject others is simply foolishness and blind imitation (taqlīd). Thus, when God mentioned the main argument in support of what Muhammad brought regarding knowledge of God, as well as the main argument establishing the prophethood of Muḥammad, there was no excuse left for anyone to dis-
pute with Muḥammad concerning his faith. It is for this reason, therefore, that God followed all this with the threat, `Those who reject faith in the signs of God shall have a terrible torment, for God is All-Mighty, dispensing retribution'" (Rāzi, VII, pp. 167–68. For a simplified summary of these arguments, see Nisābüri, III, pp. 120–21).

Nisābüri and Ibn ʿArabi comment on the first five verses of this sura not from the point of view of tafsīr, but of ta'wil. Even though it has not been necessary for us to return to the first two verses in presenting the views of other commentators, it is important to present Nisābüri's highly original commentary on these verses in their present context. He begins with a discussion of the letters alif lām mīm as symbols of the One who is the source of all existents, which are the material and spiritual realms.

He says:

"The alif refers to a self-subsisting being. The lām refers to affirmation and negation, the affirmation is in the lām of possession: `to Him belongs (lāhu) all that is in the heavens and in the earth' (Q. 2:255) and the negation in the negating lām (lā meaning not), that is, nothing exists in reality except Him. The mīm also refers to affirmation and negation. The affirmation is in the mīm of His name al-Qayyūm (the Eternal Sovereign). The negation is in the negating mīm (mā meaning not), that is, there is no reality in existence except Him. Both of these arguments are based on the words `Alif lām mīm. God, there is no god but He, the Everliving, the Eternal Sovereign.' The word Allāh [which begins with the alif] is the affirmation of His eternal essence (dhāt). `There is no god but He,' [which begin with the lām], is the negation of association (shirk) of any other with His being, and the affirmation of His oneness in His being. `The Everliving, the Eternal Sovereign' is the affirmation of all His attributes as He possesses them, and the negation of all signs of deficiency in His essence. God has, therefore, deposited all the meanings of this verse in His saying `alif lām mīm.' The meaning of His word `Allāh' is hidden in the first of its letters, the alif. The meaning of His words `there is no lā (lā) god but He' is hidden in the second letter, the lām. The meaning of His words `the Everliving, the Eternal Sovereign (al-Ḥayy al-Qayyūm)' is hidden in the last letter, the mīm. Thus the greatest name of God is hidden in the letters alif lām mīm, as was related on
the authority of Sa‘îd b. Jubayr and others. They are, moreover, the mystery of the Qur’ān and its essence, as related on the authority of Abū Bakr and ‘Ali.”

Nīsābūrī then goes on to exegese the third verse as follows:

“Thus after manifesting the mysteries of His divinity in His saying ‘God, there is no god but He, the Everliving, the Eternal Sovereign,’ He manifested the gracious attributes (al-tāf) of His Lordship (rubūbiyyah) which are hidden behind the veils of majesty (i‘zah) with His beloved Muḥammad by saying ‘He sent down the Book to you with the truth.’ This is to say that He sent down the realities of the Qur‘ān and its lights upon your heart in the reality which is manifest to your innermost being, but hidden to your outward person. Thus have you become witness to God’s mystery which is deposited in the alif lām mim. This is the mystery which is with ‘God, there is no god but He, the Everliving, the Eternal Sovereign.’ You have become one who confirms this mystery, confirming it not through imitation, but through realization” [Nīsābūrī, III, p. 136].

Ibn ‘Arabi’s exegesis of verse 3 reflects, not the relation of God with His beloved Prophet, as in that of Nīsābūrī, but the inner dimension of prophethood and revelation. Thus, “He sent down the Book to you with the truth” means “He raised you from one station to another and from one degree to another through the revelation of the Book to you in successive portions until you attained to the knowledge of divine oneness from the viewpoint of the multiplicity (jām) known as the Qur’ānic reason (aql).” The words “confirming [the scriptures] that were before it” mean “confirming the eternal oneness which was known in primordial time, and which was preserved in the unknown of potentiality” [Ibn ‘Arabi, I, pp. 135–36].

Ṭabarṣī presents two related interpretations of the phrase “with the truth.” The first is “the truth of its reports or narratives.” The second is “in truth, that is what divine wisdom requires in the sending of an apostle.” Ṭabarṣī accepts both interpretations as true.

He likewise reports two views of the phrase “confirming [the scriptures] that were before it.” “The first is that the Qur‘ān confirms previous scriptures by agreeing with the reports they contain. In this there is a proof of the prophethood of Muḥammad. This is because this would not have been possible unless knowledge of such things was already with God, the Knower of all hidden things. The second view is that it means that the Qur‘ān confirms the veracity

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of the prophets and the truth of the scriptures which they brought. It
does not confirm some and deny others” [Tabarsi, III, pp. 9–10].

Tabâtabâ’i argues at length that the words nazzala and anzala
[sent down] are used interchangeably in the Qur’an. He argues fur-
ther that gradual revelation, as in the case of the Qur’an, means
continuity of every portion with those following it. This is because
they all are portions of the same revelation. He also discusses in
some detail the character of the Torah and Gospel, which the Qur’an
confirms. He concludes from this and other verses that “the Torah
and Gospel, which are in the hands of the Jews and Christians, are
not totally devoid of the revelations sent down by God to Moses and
Jesus, even though they suffer from deletions and alterations. The
scriptures which were with the Jews and Christians were the Torah
that still exists today and the four well-known Gospels. Thus the
Qur’an confirms the Torah and the Gospel which exist today, but
not in all their contents. This is because there are a number of
Qur’anic verses asserting deletions and alterations in them [see for
example Q. 5:144]” [Tabatabâ’i, III, pp. 8–9; cf. pp. 7–9].

Sayyid Qutb does not discuss any particular point or phrase in
any of the verses under discussion. He insists, as he does in his
general introduction to the sura, that the verses treat the beliefs of
the people of the Book in general without reference to the delegation
of Najran. He further argues that this sura, in over thirty of its two
hundred verses, insists that Islam is the only true divine message,
and that it came to confirm and complete those that came before it.
Thus the scriptures that God revealed before the Qur’an, as well as
the Qur’an itself, are in essence one Book. Yet it is this last and final
revelation which God sent to judge among all the people of the
Book—Jews, Christians and Muslims—concerning the things in
which they have differed [Qutb, I, pp. 524–32].

Verse 4

The issue that has concerned commentators in connection with
this verse is the mention of the furqân [criterion] after that of the
Qur’an and the Torah and Gospel. The word furqân is generally used
as one of the names of the Qur’an [see commentary on 2:53 in vol.
1]. Since the Qur’an is mentioned in the previous verse as a revela-
tion preceded by the Torah and the Gospel, what is the wisdom in
mentioning it again here? Commentators have offered various an-
swers to this problem.

Tabari cites two basic opinions on the meaning of the word
furqân in this verse. “God means by this that He sent down the

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criterion distinguishing truth from error regarding the disagreement among [religious] parties and the followers of various sects concerning Jesus.” Ṭabarî reports this view on the authority of Muhammad b. Ja‘far b. al-Zubayr. The second view, which he reports on the authority of Qatādah, asserts that the *furuqān* here means the Qur’an. “God sent it down to Muḥammad, and by means of it He distinguished between truth and error. In it He forbade the things that are unlawful (*ḥarām*) and enjoined the things that are lawful (*ḥalāl*). In it He promulgated His [sacred] laws, established His bounds (*ḥudūd*) and obligations (*farā’id*). In it He set forth His elucidation (*bayān*) and commanded obedience to Him and forbade disobedience.”

The same view is also reported on the authority of al-Rabî’ b. Anas. Ṭabarî, however, prefers the first view because “God, in His saying ‘He sent the Book to you with the truth,’ had already mentioned the revelation of the Qur’an [in the previous verse] before mentioning the revelation of the Torah and the Gospel in this verse. There is no doubt that the Book here refers to the Qur’an and no other book. Thus there is no need to repeat that yet another time after having mentioned it previously” ([Ṭabarî, VI, pp. 161–64]).

Ibn Kathîr reviews the opinions of various *tafsîr* masters, as in Ṭabarî, but without adopting any particular view ([Ibn Kathîr, II, p. 4]).

Zamakhshârî presents the following argument concerning the meaning of the word *furuqān* in this verse:

“If you ask what is here intended by the word *furuqān*, I answer, It is the entire genre of heavenly books because they are all a criterion (*furuqān*) distinguishing truth from falsehood. It may also mean all the scriptures mentioned here. It is as though God said after mentioning the three scriptures, ‘and He sent down that by means of which truth may be distinguished from error,’ meaning either all His scriptures, or these three Books in particular. It may also be that God here intended a fourth scripture, which is the Psalms (*Zabûr*), as He says, ‘and We gave David the Psalms’ ([Q. 17:55]). It may also be that God here repeated mention of the Qur’an, denoting its special characteristic of being a criterion distinguishing between truth and error. This He did after mentioning it by its generic name, by way of emphasizing its greatness and manifesting its special excellence” ([Zamakhsharî, I, p. 336]).

Râzî begins his discussion with a brief review of the three main positions on the issue under discussion. He asserts that it is possible
that God mentioned the Qur’an again as the *furqān* because it was revealed after the Torah and Gospel, and is thus a criterion distinguishing between truth and error concerning the things on which Jews and Christians have differed. Another interpretation which, according to Rāzī, represents the view of most *tafsīr* masters, is that all three scriptures are not only a source of divine guidance, they are also divine criteria distinguishing between lawful and unlawful acts and precepts in addition to other sacred laws.

Rāzī, however, rejects these two views as he does the assertion that the term *furqān* in this verse refers to the Psalms of David. He argues: “As for identifying the Psalms as the *furqān*, it is unlikely because the Psalms contain no laws or precepts, but only exhortations. Thus to characterize the Torah and Gospel as *furqān* is more probable than the Psalms because they do contain clear evidence of this in their precepts and laws. As for the second view which identifies the Qur’an as the *furqān* in this instance, it is also unlikely because God’s saying ‘and He sent down the criterion’ is conjoined to what is before it [that is ‘he sent down the Book to you’]. Moreover, that which is conjoined to a thing must be different from the thing to which it is conjoined, which is in this case the Qur’an, but which was already mentioned. This means, therefore, that the *furqān* must be other than the Qur’an. With this in view, the weakness of the third argument [which identifies all three scriptures as the *furqān*], may be discerned. This is because the word *furqān* here would be used as an adjective qualifying all three scriptures. But conjoining an adjective to the noun which it qualifies, although it did occur in rare instances of poetry, is nonetheless bad form, unworthy of the speech of God, the Exalted. I therefore prefer a fourth interpretation of this verse. It is that the *furqān* is intended here as the miracles which God linked to the revelation of these scriptures. This is because when the Jews and Christians brought these Books—claiming that they were scriptures sent down to them by God, yet they lacked the proof supporting this claim—[they lacked] the argument which would establish the distinction between their claim and the claims of the people of falsehood. Thus when God manifested such miracles in support of their claim, distinction between the claims of the people of truth and those of the people of falsehood was established. The *furqān*, therefore, is this evidentiary miracle. Hence, when God mentioned that He ‘sent down the Book with the truth’ and that He ‘sent the Torah and the Gospel aforetime,’ He asserted that He also sent down with them the criterion of truth, which is the miracle establishing their soundness and pointing out the difference between these scriptures and all other
books." Râzî admits that no other commentator has interpreted the verse in this manner, but he insists that only in this way would the meaning, eloquence, and great force of the Qur'anic language be manifested [Râzî, VII, p. 172; cf. Shawkânî, I, p. 312 for another review of the three views already discussed].

For Nisâbûrî the mystic, the furqân is the criterion distinguishing not truth from error, but rather the Qur'an from all other scriptures and the Prophet Muḥammad from all other prophets. Thus the furqân is

"that which distinguishes the sending down (tanzîl) of the Qur'an upon your [Muḥammad'c] heart from the sending down (inzâl) of other scriptures to the physical forms of the prophets, and distinguishes between teaching you [Muḥammad] the Qur'an and teaching them the scriptures. For, while they had nearly studied the scriptures, you have modelled your character upon the Qur'an. Great indeed is the difference between a prophet who comes with a Book and being himself a light, 'there has come to you from God a light and clear scripture' [Q. 5:15], and a prophet who comes with a light of the scriptures, 'say, who then sent down the Book which Moses brought, a guidance to humankind' [Q. 6:91]. Great indeed is the difference between a prophet who is honored by having exhortation inscribed for him on the tablets [i.e., of the Torah], 'and We inscribed for him [Moses] on the tablets an exhortation [to be learned] in all things' [Q. 7:145], and a prophet whose community is honored by having faith ('imân) inscribed in their hearts, 'these are people in whose hearts He inscribed faith' [Q. 58:22]" [Nisâbûrî, III, p. 137].

Ibn 'Arabî, in contrast, understands the furqân as the faith of divine oneness in relation to the universal mind. He relates this concept neither to prophethood nor to revelation, as other commentators have done. Rather the furqân as a concept is tawhîd, or divine oneness as it relates to the Creation. It is the truth or the discerning (furqânî) mind which is the origin of uprightness and the starting point of the call to faith [Ibn 'Arabî, I, p. 165].

Qumî reports a tradition on the authority of the Sixth Imam Ja'far al-Ṣâdiq who said, "The furqân is every clear or unambiguous (muḥkam) verse, while the Book is the entire Qur'an which is confirmed by the prophets who came before it" [Qumî, I, p. 96].

Ṭabarî quotes this same tradition but argues that by the furqân is here meant the Qur'an in its entirety. "God mentioned it twice because of the different attributes presented in each instance, even
though they all pertain to one subject. This is because each of these attributes denotes a special characteristic different from other characteristics. The *furqân* is the criterion by which truth could be distinguished from error with regard to religious matters, such as the *hajj* pilgrimage and other legal matters, all of which are contained in the Qur'ān."

Ṭabarṣi then cites several other views concerning the meaning of the term *furqân* in this verse. According to one interpretation, the *furqân* here means the decisive argument of the Prophet Muhammad against those who disputed with him concerning Jesus. Still another view is that the *furqân* means victory as in “the day of the *furqân*, the day when the two parties met [i.e. in the battle of Bādru] (Q. 8:41)” [Ṭabarṣi, III, p. 10].

Ṭabāṭaba’ī interprets the term *furqân* in this verse in its widest sense. It is that which distinguishes or separates one thing from another. Somewhat more specifically, however, the *furqân*, as a criterion of distinction or separation, applies to the distinction between truth and error in human actions and the religious principles governing them. “If the distinction required by God refers to right guidance, then it is the criterion of discerning truth from falsehood in belief and the [philosophical and theological] sciences and the obligation mandatory upon the servant and what is not required of him with regard to the actions committed in this world. Should this be the case, then *furqân* here applies to all the fundamental and ancillary [religious] sciences which God sent down to His prophets through revelation. In this sense, *furqân* would be a far more general term than simply scriptures.”

Ṭabāṭaba’ī then cites a number of Qur’anic verses in support of this general argument. The *furqân* in this general sense is also referred to in the Qur’ān as the scales *(mizân).* He cites in support of this view the Qur’anic verse “We have sent our messengers with clear elucidations and sent down with them the Book and the Scales in order that humankind may establish justice (Q. 57:25; cf. Q. 2:113)” [Ṭabāṭaba’ī, III, pp. 9–10].

Sayyid Ḥuṭb refers the term *furqân* as used in this verse to the Qur’ān.

“This new Book [the Qur’ān] is a criterion of distinction *(furqân)* between the truth which the previous revealed scriptures contained, and the deviations and errors which accrued to them under the influence of subsequent vain, personal desires as well as the intellectual and political currents which later prevailed. This verse, therefore, affirms that there is no way for the people of the Book to
deny the truth of this new message. This is because it has followed the same pattern which previous divine messages followed. Its scripture, moreover, was sent down with the truth as were other revealed scriptures. It was sent down to a human messenger, just as previous scriptures were sent down to human messengers. It is a Book confirming the scriptures of God which were revealed before it. It was revealed by Him who has the power to reveal scriptures. It was sent down by Him who alone has the prerogative of establishing the way of life for humankind—their beliefs, laws, and the norms of their morality and behavior—which are stipulated in the Book which He sent down to His Messenger [Muḥammad]” (Qūṭb, I, p. 539).

**Verses 7–11**

7. He it is who sent down the Book to you. In it are verses clear and decisive—they are the mother of the Book—and others multivalent. As for those in whose hearts is deviany, they follow that in it which is multivalent, desiring dissension, and desiring its exegesis. Yet no one knows its exegesis except God, and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say, “We have faith in it, for it is all from our Lord.” Yet none remember except those who are possessed of prudent minds.

8. “Our Lord, do not cause our hearts to swerve after you have guided us. Bestow upon us mercy from you, for you are the Bestower!

9. “Our Lord, you shall surely gather humankind for a day in which there is no doubt! Surely, God will not fail the appointed time.”

10. As for those who have rejected faith, neither their wealth nor their children will avail them anything with God. These shall be fuel for the Fire.

11. Likewise were the people of Pharaoh and those before them. They cried lies to our signs, and God seized them for their sins, for God is severe in retribution.

**Verse 7**

This verse has been the subject of much dispute throughout the history of tafsīr. Commentators have differed widely concerning
every phrase. It will not be possible within the limited scope of this work to consider all the questions that have occupied commentators; only the following three: (1) the meaning and significance of the two important terms muḥkam (clear or decisive) and muṭaṣḥābih (multivalent or obscure); (2) the identity of those “in whose hearts is deviancy,” and (3) the identity of those “who are firmly rooted in knowledge” and the nature and extent of their knowledge. We shall examine these questions one by one in order that the diversity of exegetical opinions may be clearly discerned.

Ṭabari characterizes the “clear and decisive” verses as “those which are decisive in their clarity and comprehensiveness, and whose proofs and arguments are incontrovertibly established for the things they are meant to affirm or deny: lawful and unlawful things (ḥalāl and ḥarām), promise and threat (wa‘d and wa‘id), rewards and punishments, commands and prohibitions, narratives and parables (qiṣaṣ and amthāl), admonitions and lessons, and the like.” Ṭabari interprets the phrase “mother of the Book” to mean “the foundation (āṣl) of the Book.” He argues that such verses are “the foundation of the Book, which contains the fundamentals of the faith: its obligations (furū‘id), bounds (ḥudūd), as well as all that which human creatures require in the affairs of their religion, and all the obligations which God has laid upon them both in this life and the next. God called these verses ‘the mother of the Book’ because they constitute the major part of the Qur’an, and because they are the final resort for the people of the Qur’an in times of need” (Ṭabari, VI, p. 170). Ṭabari’s interpretation of this phrase has already been discussed (see “Titles of Sūrat al-Fātihah” in vol. 1).

The term mutaṣḥābihūt literally means alike, or things which resemble one another. Thus Ṭabari says, “As for God’s saying, ‘and others which are multivalent’ (mutaṣḥābihūt), this means that they are alike in recitation [i.e. in diction, but different in meaning” (See Q. 2:25 and 2:70 for examples of this usage).

Ṭabari interprets the verse under discussion thus: “He, from whom nothing in the earth or in heaven is hidden, it is who sent down to you the Qur’an, O Muhammad. In it are verses decisive in their elucidation. These are the essence of the Book on which rests your faith and the faith of your community, and which is your resort and theirs as regards the laws of Islam, which I made obligatory on both you and them. In it are also verses which are alike (mutaṣḥābihūt) in recitation, but diverse in their meanings” (Ṭabari, VI, pp. 172–74).

Ṭabari then reports the disagreements among tafsīr masters as to which verses can be considered “clear and decisive”, and which
“multivalent.” According to some early authorities, the clear and
decisive verses are “those which are to be followed. They are the
abrogating verses, or those whose precepts are firm and unchange-
able. Multivalent verses are those which are not to be followed; they
are abrogated verses.”

Ṭabari further reports that Ibn ʻAbbās is said to have specifically
identified certain verses as belonging to either category. Among the
clear and decisive verses are 6:151–153 and 17:23–39. It is further
related that he asserted that the clear and decisive verses are “the
Qurʾan’s abrogating verses, its sanctions and prohibitions, its
bounds and obligations, and all that which may be believed in and
followed. As for the multivalent verses, they are those which are
abrogated, those whose meaning might be made clearer by constru-
ing a phrase as belonging to either the context before or after it
(muqaddam and muʿākhkhar), its parables and oaths, and all that
which must be believed in but not followed.”

This view is also reported on the authority of a number of the
Prophet’s Companions, as well as Qatādah, al-Rabi’ b. Anas, and
al-Dāhkhā. According to Mujāhid, the clear and decisive verses are
only those which contain specific precepts of lawful and unlawful
things. All other verses are multivalent, or mutashābihāt. Still anoth-
er view asserts that the clear and decisive verses are those which
can admit of only one meaning or interpretation, and the multi-
valent verses are those which can admit of more than one meaning
or interpretation. Thus Muḥammad b. Jaʿfar b. al-Zubayr is reported
to have said concerning the clear and decisive verses, “In them is the
argument or proof (hujjah) of the Lord [over His creatures], the
protection of the servants (iḥād) [from committing breaches of the law],
and the repudiation of all dissension and falsehood. They cannot be
freely interpreted, nor can their syntax be altered or differently con-
strued. ‘Others which are multivalent’ [or are alike] in their expres-
sion of the truth, are verses capable of being freely interpreted, differ-
ently construed, and esoterically exegeted. They are a trial from God
with which He has tested His servants as He tested them with
lawful (ḥalāl) and unlawful (ḥaram) sanctions and prohibitions.
They should not, however, be so interpreted as to support falsehood,
or be made to deviate from the truth” (Ṭabari, VI, pp. 174–77).

Ṭabari goes on to say that according to other tafsīr masters, the
clear and decisive verses are those which relate in a lucid and deci-
sive manner to the stories of bygone peoples and the messengers
sent by God to them. The multivalent verses are those which, in
relating the same stories in the various suras of the Qurʾan, present
some ambiguity by either agreeing in their language and usage and

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diverging in their meanings, or the reverse. Thus Ibn Wahb reports
that Ibn Zayd identified the muḫkam and mutashābih verses in
accordance with this principle. He recited sura 11, Ḥūd, which be-
gins with the declaration, “Alīf lām rā. It is a Book whose verses
have been made decisive, then set forth in detail by One who is
Wise, Aware [Q. 11:1–2].” Ibn Zayd then explained that the same
sura, to verse 24, recounts the Prophet Muḥammad’s encounter with
his own people. This is followed [verses 25–48] by the story of the
Prophet Noah and his people. This in turn is followed by the stories
of the tribe of ‘Ād, then those of the prophets Sālih, Abraham, Lūt,
Shu‘āyб, and Moses, and their peoples [verses 50–99]. Among the
mutashābih verses are those which tell the story of Moses in many
places of the Qur’an, and those, like them, which employ different
words to express similar meanings. Some examples of these are:
“Let into it” and “Carry in it [the Ark], [Q. 23:27 and 11:40]; “Slip
in your hand” and “Enter your hand [O Moses, into your bosom]”
[Q. 28:32 and 27:12]; and “He [Moses] cast down his staff and, be-
hold, it became a snake slithering” and “He cast it down and, be-
hold, it became an unmistakable serpent” [Q. 20:20 and 7:107]. Ibn
Zayd then comments, “All this is in order to show God’s judgement
between the prophets and their peoples.” Ibn Zayd goes on, “Anyone
whom God wishes to test and cause to fall into error would say,
‘Why is this not like that, and why is that not like this!’” [Ṭabarī, VI,
pp. 177–79].

Other interpreters have, according to Ṭabarī, asserted that the
clear and decisive verses are all those which the learned are able to
understand and interpret. The multivalent verses are those which
no one can understand or interpret correctly. God has preserved
the interpretation of such verses in His hidden knowledge. These in-
clude verses dealing with the return of Jesus, the rising of the sun
from the place of its setting, and the time of the Day of Resurrection
and the end of the world. According to this view, the unconnected
letters at the heads of 29 suras are among the multivalent verses of
the Qur’an. This view is reported on the authority of Jābīr b. ʿAbd
Allāh b. Riʿāb, as we saw in our discussion of sura 2:1. Ṭabarī him-
self accepts this view. He argues that “this is because all the verses
that God had sent down to His Messenger, peace be upon him, were
intended as clear signs and guidance for him and his community. It
is, therefore, inconceivable that the Qur’an should contain verses
for which they would have no need, or verses of which they are in
need but have no way of knowing their interpretation. Every thing in
the Qur’an is necessary for God’s creatures to know, even though
there are certain significations which they have no need to com-

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prehend. Nevertheless, people are often obliged to seek these significations, as for instance where God says, ‘On a day when some of your Lord’s signs shall come, no soul shall benefit from its faith if it had not had faith previously, or that it had earned some good through its faith’ [Q. 6:158].’” The Prophet informed his community “that the sign of which God speaks in this verse is the rising of the sun from the west. What was necessary for the people to know was the time when repentance would be accepted, and thus would benefit the penitent, but without specifying the number of years, months, or days of that period.” Tabari goes on: “God had thus clarified this for them in the Book, and explained it further through His Messenger. What they have no need for is the length of time between the revelation of this verse and the occurrence of that sign. Knowledge of such events will avail them nothing in this world or the world to come. It is this knowledge which God has withheld from His creatures, and preserved for Himself alone.” Tabari then cites the encounter between the Prophet and a few men of the Jews of Madina who sought to know the duration of the Muslim community through the computation of the numerical values of the unconnected letters. Tabari concludes: “If the mutashabih is what we have described, then all else is muhkim. This is because the muhkim [of the Qur’an] must be clear, having only one signification. It must be capable of only one interpretation, obvious to anyone who hears it. It may also be muhkim even if it admits of many meanings and interpretations. In this case, the meaning intended is obtained through God’s explanation [of one verse by another], or the explanation of His Messenger to his community. The knowledge of the learned of this community can in no way go beyond what we have here explained” [Tabari, VI, pp. 179–82].

Ibn Kathir comments on the muhkim and mutashabih verses as follows:

“God, the exalted, declares here that there are in the Qur’an clear and decisive verses that are the ‘mother of the Book,’ that is, verses that are so clear in their purport they would confuse no one. Other verses, however, are multivalent in purport for many or, at least, some people. Thus anyone who refers the multivalent verses to the ones that are clear, and lets the verses that are decisive judge over those that are multivalent, he would be guided aright. But anyone who does the opposite, he shall be in a reverse condition. It is for this reason that God said, ‘They are the
mother of the Book,' that is to say, they are its foundation, to which people must refer when in doubt."

As for the multivalent verses, Ibn Kathir says:

"They are those the purport of which must concur with that of the clear and decisive verses. These might be capable of other interpretations, but only from the viewpoint of diction and syntax, not with regard to what is ultimately intended by them."

Ibn Kathir, like Tabari, reviews the various opinions of the early authorities of tafsir. He reports, however, on the authority of Sa'id b. Jubayr, that "they are called the mother of the Book because they are inscribed in all scriptures."

Citing Muqatil b. Hayyan, Ibn Kathir says, "It is because there are no people of any religion but that they would accept them." Perhaps the reference here is to the verses of suras 6 and 17, already cited by Tabari on the authority of Ibn 'Abbás, as being "clear and decisive" verses (Ibn Kathir, II, pp. 5-6).

Qurtubi begins his discussion with a polemical tradition directed against the Kharijites. According to a prophetic hadith reported on the authority of 'A'ishah, the Prophet said, "If you see those who follow those verses of it which are multivalent, they are the ones whom God has named in this verse, so beware of them!" This tradition is said to have been cited by the Prophet's companion Abu Umamah when he saw the heads of some Kharijites displayed at the steps of the mosque of Damascus.

Qurtubi then examines the major views concerning this verse and, like Tabari, prefers the view reported on the authority of Muhammad b. Ja'far b. al-Zubayr, already cited. According to another view which Qurtubi reports, the muqam of the Qur'an is the Fatiha, because the prayers would not be valid without it. Still another view asserts that it is sura 112, "Sincere Faith," because it is nothing more than a declaration of God's oneness. Qurtubi further relates that "it has been asserted that the entire Qur'an is clear and decisive (muqam), in accordance with God's saying, 'It is a Book whose verses have been rendered clear and decisive' (Q. 11:1). It has been also argued that it is all mutashabih, in accordance with God's saying, 'It is a Book which is all alike (mutashabih)' (Q. 39:23)."

Qurtubi, however, rejects both interpretations and argues:

"I say, this has nothing to do with the meaning of this verse. God's saying, 'It is a Book whose verses are rendered
clear and decisive’ means that they are so only within the Qur’an’s order and coherence. It also means that it is the truth from God.” Likewise, “The meaning of the words ‘It is a Book which is all alike’ is that it is a Book whose various parts resemble one another and confirm one another.”

Qurtubi prefers the view which holds that mutashâbih simply means that such verses are capable of more than one meaning or interpretation. He cites, by way of example, sura 2:70. Still another view holds that the muhâkam is that which admits of only one meaning, while the mutashâbih is capable of many meanings. But if all meanings or interpretations are reduced to one, and all the others rejected, then all the multivalent verses become clear and decisive. Qurtubi therefore concludes: “The clear and decisive verses constitute the primary part of the Qur’an to which all tertiary parts are to be referred. It is the mutashâbih which is tertiary” (Qurtubi, IV, pp. 9–11).

Qurtubi then points out that the well-known traditionist and Qur’anic scholar Abû Ja’far al-Nahhâs (d. 338/950) argued that the clear and decisive verses are those which are clear in themselves, requiring no other verses to clarify them. Examples of such verses are “Nor is there anyone equal to Him” [Q. 112:4] and “I am surely forgiving towards him who repents” [Q. 20:82]. An example of the multivalent verses is “Surely, God forgives all sins” [Q. 39:53]. For a proper understanding of this verse, it must be referred to the verse “God will not forgive the sin of associating others with Him” [Q. 4:48 and 116] or to verse 20:82, cited above.

Qurtubi concludes with some legal considerations of the muhâkam and mutashâbih as abrogating and abrogated verses. He cites the opinion of the traditionist Ibn Khuwayzimandâd who argued that the mutashâbih is of many kinds. Qurtubi here considers the aspect of ambiguity resulting from disagreement among scholars as to which of any two seemingly contradictory verses abrogates the other. Thus ‘Ali and Ibn ‘Abbâs held that a pregnant woman whose husband might die before the end of her term “must observe abstinence to the end of the longer of the two terms.” ‘Umar (the second caliph), Zayd b. Thâbit, Ibn Masûd, and others said that she should wait until she delivers. They asserted that the verse “of the shorter sura of Women”, that is, verse 65:4, (so called because it treats the same subject as in the much longer sura 4, i.e., “Women”), abrogated the verse stipulating a period of four months and ten days [Q. 2:234]. But ‘Ali and Ibn ‘Abbâs insisted that it did not.
Another example of disagreement among scholars is the controversy over the verse stipulating a will for the heirs of a dying man (see Q. 2:240 and commentary in vol. 1). Was this verse or was it not abrogated by the verses dealing with inheritance (see Q. 4:11–12). An important issue arises when two verses appear to contradict one another without discernible indications or conditions of abrogation. The question then is which of the two should be given priority over the other. An example of this is where the Qur’an, in the context of regulating the marriage bond between close blood relations, first declares, “Nor should you take two sisters simultaneously in marriage,” then, in the next verse, goes on to say, “Beyond these [marriage restrictions], all women are lawful for you [to marry]” (Q. 4:23–24). This, Qurṭūbī thinks, could cause confusion in the case of two handmaid sisters. Yet the previous verse clearly forbids a man to marry two sisters simultaneously. Qurṭūbī further asserts: “The two readings of a verse should not be taken to mean that it is multivalent. Rather the two readings are like two verses, hence both ought to be followed” (Qurṭūbī, IV, pp. 11–12).

Zamakhshari offers nothing new in his interpretation of the two terms under discussion. Of special interest, however, is his reasoning of why the entire Qur’an is not muḥkam, and the verses he selects as examples of the decisive and multivalent. In both cases his arguments reflect his Mu’tazili thinking. One selection includes the verses he “Sight cannot encompass Him” (Q. 6:103) and “There shall be radiant faces on that day, gazing at their Lord” (Q. 75:22–23). The first verse is muḥkam because it is a direct statement, while the second is mutashābih because it is a metaphorical depiction of the bliss of the righteous on the day of judgment. The other selection reflects Mu’tazili thinking with regard to God’s justice, which excludes any possibility of imputing evil or unjust actions to God: “God does not enjoin lewdness” (Q. 7:28) and “When We wish to destroy a town, We give command to those of its people who live extravagantly, and they commit acts of depravity therein” (Q. 17:16). Here too, the first verse is muḥkam and the second mutashābih.

Zamakhshari then argues:

“If you ask why the Qur’an is not muḥkam in its entirety, I say it is like that because if all of it were muḥkam, people would accept it only on account of the ease with which its ideas can be grasped, and thus neglect careful investigation and analysis which are necessary in pondering and comprehending it. Were they to do this, they would annul the
only way by which it is possible to arrive at the knowledge of God and His oneness (tawhid). It is also like that because the mutashabih is a test of, and a means of distinction between those who are firm in their belief and those who are shaky. It is also because the vigorous debates among scholars and their tireless efforts to deduce the meanings of the mutashabih by referring it back to the muhkam result in great benefits and much knowledge, as well as the attainment of high stations with God. Finally, it is because the man of faith, who is certain that there is no contradiction or discord in the word of God, if he were to discern some apparent contradiction in its literal meaning, and thus may be troubled by this, would nonetheless seek a way to harmonize between the mutashabih and muhkam. To this end, he would ponder by himself and confer with others until God would grant him the insight to discern the unity of the mutashabih with the muhkam. Thus would his peace of mind in his belief increase, and his certainty would be strengthened" (Zamakhshari, I, pp. 337–38).

Râzî interprets this verse in the context of the whole passage which, according to most classical commentators, was revealed in answer to the errors of the Christians concerning the person of Jesus. He starts by arguing that this and the previous two verses bear two interpretations. The first is that the assertion "Surely, nothing in the earth or in heaven is hidden from God" could be seen either as a further emphasis of God's "everlasting sovereignty," or as an answer to the errors of the Christians.

According to the first interpretation, God manifests His sovereignty and power through creating and managing the affairs of His creatures. The benefits accruing to the creatures are of two kinds: corporeal and spiritual. Corporeal benefits include the stature, mind, and other faculties that God has perfected in man. It is to this that the verse "It is He who forms you in the womb as He wills" refers.

Râzî continues: "As for the spiritual benefits, they include the high honor [with which humankind is favored] and knowledge which makes the spirit like a polished mirror in which the images of all existents are reflected. It is to this that God refers when He says 'He it is who sent down the Book to you.'"

With regard to the second possible interpretation, Râzî says: "Among the errors of the Christians is their insistence on the literal