

Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān

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.

Ṭabarī, like most classical *tafsīr* masters, reads the verse in the context of the theological debate between the Prophet and the

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*)" (**Ṭabarī**, VI, p. 160).

Ibn Kathīr 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 Kathīr 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 Kathīr**, II, p. 3).

Zamakhsharī 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" (**Zamakhsharī**, 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.

Qurṭubī 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 *injīl* (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.⁵ But most people accept

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

the previous view. This is because of God's saying 'Thus have We given Moses and Aaron the Criterion (*furqān*), a light and a remembrance for the God-fearing' (Q. 21: 48)—that is, the Torah. The word *injīl* is derived from the word *najl*, meaning *aṣl* (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 *najala*, meaning to derive or draw out. Thus from the *Injīl* are derived branches of knowledge and wisdom. The word *najl* 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 *najl*, which also means breadth. Thus the Gospel is called *Injīl* because it is a broad source of light and guidance. 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, Qurṭubī 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'ālibī, 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' *munājāt* (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" (Qurṭubī, 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 subtle and marvelous narrative. This is because those Christians who disputed with the Messenger of God were told, as it were, 'either you dispute with him concerning knowledge of God, or concerning prophethood. If the dispute concerns knowledge of God, and that you argue that He has a son, and that Muḥammad argues that He has no son, Muḥammad is in the right as can be proven by incontrovertible rational arguments. This is because it has been established beyond doubt that God is Everliving, Eternal Sovereign. 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] prophethood, 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?"

Rāzī 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."

Rāzī 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."

Rāzī 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] Brahmins (*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 Muḥammad 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'" (Rāzī, VII, pp. 167-68. For a simplified summary of these arguments, see Nīsābūrī, III, pp. 120-21).

Nīsābūrī and Ibn 'Arabī comment on the first five verses of this sura not from the point of view of *tafsīr*, but of *ta'wīl*. 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 Nīsābūrī'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 (*lahu*) 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*) god but He' is hidden in the second letter, the *lām*. The meaning of His words 'the Everliving, the Eternal Sovereign (*al-Hayy 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'īd b. Jubayr and others. They are, moreover, the mystery of the Qur'an and its essence, as related on the authority of Abū Bakr and 'Alī."

Nisābūrī 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 (*alṭāf*) of His Lordship (*rubūbiyyah*) which are hidden behind the veils of majesty (*'izzah*) 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'an 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 mīm*. 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" (Nisābūrī, III, p. 136).

Ibn 'Arabī's exegesis of verse 3 reflects, not the relation of God with His beloved Prophet, as in that of Nisābūrī, 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 (*jam'*) known as the Qur'anic 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 'Arabī, I, pp. 135-36).

Ṭabarsī 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." Ṭabarsī 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'an 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'an confirms the veracity

of the prophets and the truth of the scriptures which they brought. It does not confirm some and deny others" (**Ṭabarsī**, III, pp. 9-10).

Ṭabāṭabā'ī argues at length that the words *nazzala* and *anzala* (sent down) are used interchangeably in the Qur'an. He argues further 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]" (**Ṭabāṭabā'ī**, III, pp. 8-9; cf. pp. 7-9).

Sayyid Quṭb 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 (**Quṭb**, I, pp. 524-32).

Verse 4

The issue that has concerned commentators in connection with this verse is the mention of the *furqān* (criterion) after that of the Qur'an and the Torah and Gospel. The word *furqān* 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 revelation preceded by the Torah and the Gospel, what is the wisdom in mentioning it again here? Commentators have offered various answers to this problem.

Ṭabarī cites two basic opinions on the meaning of the word *furqān* in this verse. "God means by this that He sent down the

criterion distinguishing truth from error regarding the disagreement among [religious] parties and the followers of various sects concerning Jesus." Ṭabarī reports this view on the authority of Muḥammad b. Ja'far b. al-Zubayr. The second view, which he reports on the authority of Qatādah, asserts that the *furqān* 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-Rabī' b. Anas. Ṭabarī, 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" (Ṭabarī, VI, pp. 161-64).

Ibn Kathīr reviews the opinions of various *tafsīr* masters, as in Ṭabarī, but without adopting any particular view (Ibn Kathīr, II, p. 4).

Zamakhsharī presents the following argument concerning the meaning of the word *furqān* in this verse:

"If you ask what is here intended by the word *furqān*, I answer, It is the entire genre of heavenly books because they are all a criterion (*furqān*) 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 (*Zabūr*), 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" (Zamakhsharī, I, p. 336).

Rāzī 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." Rāzī 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 (**Rāzī**, VII, p. 172; cf. **Shawkānī**, I, p. 312 for another review of the three views already discussed).

For Nisābūrī the mystic, the *furqān* 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 *furqān* is

"that which distinguishes the sending down (*tanzīl*) of the Qur'an upon your [Muḥammad's] heart from the sending down (*inzāl*) 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 (*īmān*) inscribed in their hearts, 'these are people in whose hearts He inscribed faith' (Q. 58:22)" (**Nisābūrī**, III, p. 137).

Ibn 'Arabī, in contrast, understands the *furqān* 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 *furqān* as a concept is *tawḥīd*, or divine oneness as it relates to the Creation. It is the truth or the discerning (*furqānī*) mind which is the origin of uprightness and the starting point of the call to faith (**Ibn 'Arabī**, I, p. 165).

Qummī reports a tradition on the authority of the Sixth Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq who said, "The *furqān* 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" (**Qummī**, I, p. 96).

Ṭabarsī quotes this same tradition but argues that by the *furqān* 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 *furqān* 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'an."

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

Ṭabāṭabā'ī interprets the term *furqān* in this verse in its widest sense. It is that which distinguishes or separates one thing from another. Somewhat more specifically, however, the *furqān*, 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 *furqān* here applies to all the fundamental and ancillary [religious] sciences which God sent down to His prophets through revelation. In this sense, *furqān* would be a far more general term than simply scriptures."

Ṭabāṭabā'ī then cites a number of Qur'anic verses in support of this general argument. The *furqān* in this general sense is also referred to in the Qur'an as the scales (*mīzān*). 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)" (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, III, pp. 9-10).

Sayyid Quṭb refers the term *furqān* as used in this verse to the Qur'an.

"This new Book [the Qur'an] is a criterion of distinction (*furqān*) 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]" (**Qutb**, 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 deviancy, 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 *mutashābih* (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.

Ṭabarī 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'īd*), rewards and punishments, commands and prohibitions, narratives and parables (*qīṣaṣ* and *amthāl*), admonitions and lessons, and the like." Ṭabarī interprets the phrase "mother of the Book" to mean "the foundation (*aṣl*) of the Book." He argues that such verses are "the foundation of the Book, which contains the fundamentals of the faith: its obligations (*farā'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" (Ṭabarī, VI, p. 170). Ṭabarī's interpretation of this phrase has already been discussed (see "Titles of *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah*" in vol. 1)

The term *mutashābihāt* literally means alike, or things which resemble one another. Thus Ṭabarī says, "As for God's saying, 'and others which are multivalent' (*mutashābihāt*), 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).

Ṭabarī 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 Muḥammad. 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 (*mutashābihāt*) in recitation, but diverse in their meanings" (Ṭabarī, VI, pp. 172-74).

Ṭabarī 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 unchangeable. Multivalent verses are those which are not to be followed; they are abrogated verses."

Ṭabarī further reports that Ibn 'Abbās 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 Qur'an'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 construing a phrase as belonging to either the context before or after it (*muqaddam* and *mu'akhhhar*), 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-Rabī' b. Anas, and al-Ḍaḥḥāk. 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 another view asserts that the clear and decisive verses are those which can admit of only one meaning or interpretation, and the multivalent verses are those which can admit of more than one meaning or interpretation. Thus Muḥammad b. Ja'far b. al-Zubayr is reported to have said concerning the clear and decisive verses, "In them is the argument or proof (*ḥujjah*) of the Lord [over His creatures], the protection of the servants ('ibād) [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 construed. 'Others which are multivalent' [or are alike] in their expression of the truth, are verses capable of being freely interpreted, differently 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 (*ḥarām*) sanctions and prohibitions. They should not, however, be so interpreted as to support falsehood, or be made to deviate from the truth" (Ṭabarī, VI, pp. 174-77).

Ṭabarī goes on to say that according to other *tafsīr* masters, the clear and decisive verses are those which relate in a lucid and decisive 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 Qur'an, present some ambiguity by either agreeing in their language and usage and

diverging in their meanings, or the reverse. Thus Ibn Wahb reports that Ibn Zayd identified the *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* verses in accordance with this principle. He recited sura 11, *Hūd*, which begins with the declaration, "Alif 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 Šāliḥ, Abraham, Lūt, Shu'ayb, 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, behold, it became a snake slithering" and "He cast it down and, behold, 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 include 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 Jābir b. 'Abd Allāh b. Ri'āb, as we saw in our discussion of sura 2:1. Ṭabarī himself 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-

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." Ṭabarī 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." Ṭabarī 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. Ṭabarī concludes: "If the *mutashābih* is what we have described, then all else is *muḥkam*. This is because the *muḥkam* [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 *muḥkam* 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" (Ṭabarī, VI, pp. 179-82).

Ibn Kathīr comments on the *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* 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 Kathīr 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 Kathīr, like Ṭabarī, reviews the various opinions of the early authorities of *tafsīr*. He reports, however, on the authority of Sa'īd b. Jubayr, that "they are called 'the mother of the Book' because they are inscribed in all scriptures."

Citing Muqātil b. Ḥayyān, Ibn Kathīr 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 Ṭabarī on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās, as being "clear and decisive" verses (*Ibn Kathīr*, II, pp. 5-6).

Qurṭubī begins his discussion with a polemical tradition directed against the Khārijites. According to a prophetic *ḥadīth* reported on the authority of 'Ā'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 Abū Umāmah when he saw the heads of some Khārijites displayed at the steps of the mosque of Damascus.

Qurṭubī then examines the major views concerning this verse and, like Ṭabarī, prefers the view reported on the authority of Muḥammad b. Ja'far b. al-Zubayr, already cited. According to another view which Qurṭubī reports, the *muḥkam* of the Qur'an is the *Fātiḥah*, 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. Qurṭubī further relates that "it has been asserted that the entire Qur'an is clear and decisive (*muḥkam*), 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 *mutashābih*, in accordance with God's saying, 'It is a Book which is all alike (*mutashābih*)' (Q. 39:23)."

Qurṭubī, 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."

Qurṭubī prefers the view which holds that *mutashābih* 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 *muḥkam* is that which admits of only one meaning, while the *mutashābih* 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. Qurṭubī 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 *mutashābih* which is tertiary" (Qurṭubī, IV, pp. 9-11).

Qurṭubī then points out that the well-known traditionist and Qur'anic scholar Abū Ja'far al-Naḥḥās (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.

Qurṭubī concludes with some legal considerations of the *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* as abrogating and abrogated verses. He cites the opinion of the traditionist Ibn Khuwayzimandād who argued that the *mutashābih* is of many kinds. Qurṭubī here considers the aspect of ambiguity resulting from disagreement among scholars as to which of any two seemingly contradictory verses abrogates the other. Thus 'Alī and Ibn 'Abbās 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. Thābit, Ibn Mas'ūd, 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 'Alī and Ibn 'Abbās 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, Qurṭubī thinks, could cause confusion in the case of two handmaid sisters. Yet the previous verse clearly forbids a man to marry two sisters simultaneously. Qurṭubī 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" (Qurṭubī, IV, pp. 11-12).

Zamakhsharī 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'tazilī 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'tazilī 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*.

Zamakhsharī 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 (*tawhīd*). It is also like that because the *mutashābih* 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 *mutashābih* by referring it back to the *muḥkam* 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 *mutashābih* and *muḥkam*. 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 *mutashābih* with the *muḥkam*. Thus would his peace of mind in his belief increase, and his certainty would be strengthened" (**Zamakhsharī**, I, pp. 337–38).

Rāzī 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.

Rāzī 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, Rāzī says: "Among the errors of the Christians is their insistence on the literal