

The Day of Judgment

With Special Reference to Sura Al-Wāqī‘ah

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Chapter 56 – *Al-Wāqī‘ah* – in the Qur’an is recited very often, especially at the time of death. I feel that it will be useful to explain this chapter because there are a lot of Muslims who misunderstand the verses, especially those describing Heaven and Hell. Even some of the scholars, quoting verses from this sura in their writings, explain them, based on an understanding of the situation in this world, while the Qur’an is talking to a human mind and trying to attract it by employing language which he understands. Some Muslims sometimes even apply some of these verses to areas not pertaining to the Hereafter, and in doing so make the life of the people very difficult. I am going to analyze this chapter linguistically, and from the aspect of meaning, so we know what is meant by it. This chapter deals with death, classifying the people into groups, and stating what their merits will be in the Hereafter.

The Day of Judgment has been described by many names in the Qur’an. It is called *Yawm-ul Qiyamah* which is translated into English as “Hereafter”. In Chapter Al-Fātihah¹ it

is called *Yawm-ud-Deen*² meaning that everyone will be accountable for his religion, and religion is a way of life; so, it means, it is the day on which man will be accountable for his behavior during this life. Some reciters of the Qur’an read it as *Yawm-ud-Dayn* not *Yawm-ud-Deen*. “Ad-Deen” means religion, “Ad-Dayn” means debt; so they call *Yawm-ud-Dayn* the “Day of Debt”: you owe God certain things, and that is the Day you have to repay them; He created you, He provided you, and you owe Him thanks, you owe Him obedience. It is a matter of pay and repay. *Yawm-ud-Dayn* is the day on which you will be asked: “Did you repay your debt to your Creator or not?”

The Day of Judgment is also called *Al-Wāqī‘ah* which is the title of this chapter. *Al-Wāqī‘ah* means, an event which will take place, no doubt in that. The word *waqa‘a*, which occurs in the first line means, “it will happen – it is inevitable”.

The Day of Judgment is sometimes referred to in fearful words in the Qur’an. For example, it is referred to as *Al-Qāri‘ah*. *Al-Qāri‘ah* is a terrifying sound which will affect your ears and is due to some occurrence on that day. Another

¹ Chapter 1 in the Qur’an

² The Day of Religion

term used to describe the Day of Judgment is in Chapter 'Abasa:³ **فَإِذَا جَاءَتِ الصَّاخَّةُ** is some kind of loud sound which will make the ears tremble, or shake, or shiver. In Chapter An-Nāzi'āt,⁴ the Day of Judgment is described as **الطَّامَّةُ الْكُبْرَى** –The Greatest Calamity. It is referred to with a variety of names in the Qur'an and all of these names are intended to impress people with the power of that day and what is going to happen; sometimes, the descriptions are scary, and sometimes they are attractive, and the goal is to urge human beings to act in a way so that they will attain – in the Hereafter – all that is good and lovable.

People frequently ask about the signs which will indicate that the Day of Judgment is coming closer. The ulama⁵ have divided these signs into minor and major signs. The minor signs are two:

- 1) There will be a change in the life of the Bedouins who used to live in tents: the tents will be replaced with tall buildings or skyscrapers, as we call them now.
- 2) "The slave woman will deliver her master."

What is the meaning of "The slave woman will deliver her master?" When Islam came, it prohibited a child from owning or inheriting his mother.⁶ Islam made this a means to abolish slavery. Therefore, if a man owned a slave woman and he treated her as a wife and she delivered a child, then she is called, in Islamic jurisprudence, *Ummu walad-hi* which means "mother of his son". As a result, according to the Qur'anic injunction, with the death of her owner, she would automatically be liberated and become a free woman, because the child cannot inherit his mother or be her owner. This had taken place at the time of the Prophet. Both of these signs have come to pass and we have witnessed them.

The big signs warning of the coming of the Day of Judgment are scattered throughout the Qur'an. Concerning one of the bigger signs, the Qur'anic verse says [Imam quotes Arabic. The translation is:]

"When that Day of Judgment is about to come, We shall bring forth unto them out of the earth a creature (animal

= **دَابَّةً**) which will tell them that mankind had no real faith in Our messages" [27:82].

That is how far the Qur'an has described it: that a sort of animal will emerge and talk to the people. In the books of tafseer,⁷ chapters and chapters have been written about the meaning of that verse. All of them are conjectures. Some writers have even described the dimensions of that animal as being 60 *dir'ah*⁸ in length. This is written in some books! But who has seen it to get a measure of its size? Others explain that this animal is the male offspring of the she-camel of the Prophet of 'Ad. They say that the she-camel's baby disappeared in a rock, after the death of its mother, and, at the end of time, it will come back. That is another explanation which is far removed from what the Qur'an says. Some others describe that animal as a hybrid exhibiting a part of every creature on earth, meaning that it has the wings of a bird, the body of a horse, the head of a human being, the mouth of a pig, and so on and so forth. How they got this information. . . . There are no grounds for it. However, what is written in the Qur'an is different from what is written in some of the tafseers.

When we read the Qur'an, we understand it as far as our knowledge of the Arabic language will help us to understand it, but, nowadays, a lot of Muslims read these books of tafseers and take for granted whatever is written in them. That is not right. We have to remember that the Muslim world was colonized in the recent past and this has spoiled religion for us.

With regard to the Qur'anic verse about the animal, there is no need to dwell on the size and shape, as some of the tafseers do; this information is not relevant. If it were needed, God would have clarified it for us. Some might question how an animal could talk? The answer is very easy. We have an example of the hoopoe, one of the soldiers of Sulaymān,⁹ who talked to Sulaymān. The same thing can be understood from the exchange between Sulaymān and the ants: "O you ants! Get into your dwellings, lest Solomon and his hosts crush you without even being aware of you! Thereupon, Solomon smiled joyously at her words. . . ." This means he understood the language of the ants. Therefore, the statement that an animal will come, when the Day of Judgment is near, and will

³ Chapter 80

⁴ Chapter 79

⁵ Scholars

⁶ 4:19

⁷ Qur'anic exegesis

⁸ A measure, like a yard

⁹ The Prophet Solomon

talk to the people, does not sound strange to a Muslim who believes that the hoopoe talked to Sulaymān. So, these clear-cut Qur’anic verses telling us about the coming of an animal, as a sign of the impending Day of Judgment, and talking to the people, will not be strange to those who believe.

The second big sign of the nearness of the Day of Judgment is the second coming of Jesus, peace be upon him. The Muslim ulama have not reached any consensus about the meaning of “the raising of Jesus” so that there is a lot of debate about this topic in the tafseers. The idea generally understood by the Muslims is that when the people tried to kill Jesus, God saved him by “raising him unto Himself”, so, they say, “he is still living there” and will come back at the end of time to preach the message of Islam. But the majority of the Muslim scholars are of the opinion that, if a Muslim denies that “Jesus is still living there”, it is not a sin, because there is no clear-cut Qur’anic verse, or correct sunnah, to indicate that.

Chapter Al-Wāqī‘ah starts with the word *‘idhā* (إِذَا) which is called in Arabic language *harf shart*: a letter indicating a condition. In English it is equivalent to the word *if*. “If” is indicative of a condition: there must be an answer, a “then” follows an “if”. So, the answer follows, but, in the Arabic language, it conveys the sense that it is already happening. [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The literal translation is:]

“When/if the Day of Judgment comes, there is no one who can, or will, deny it” [56:1].

The Qur’an tells us that many people deny life after death; deny the resurrection and the questioning, and say, “If we die, and turn into bones and dust, are we going to be resurrected again?” The Arabs used to mock the Prophet, peace be upon him, by asking that question when he would talk about the Day of Judgment. In Chapter Yā-Sīn,¹⁰ there is a reference to Ubayya ibn Khalaf, outwardly a Muslim, but a hypocrite in reality, who came to the Prophet, peace be upon him, carrying a piece of decayed bone in his hand; he rubbed it vigorously and turned it into dust, then said to the Prophet: “Is God able to give life to dry bones like this and decomposed ones at that? Is He going to revive them again, make them human beings, and question them?” The Prophet replied: “God is capable of reviving the bones, capable of resurrecting you and sending you to Hell.” In the context of our human understanding, if one has created something once, then, re-creating it is easier. God, who created man for the first time is

able to re-create him, because He is well-versed in every creation. So, those verses of Chapter Yā-Sīn were revealed to answer the question of Ubayya ibn Khalaf, saying, that this man, who comes with a piece of bone, forgets of what material he was created initially. [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The translation is:

“Is Man, then, not aware that it is We who create him out of a mere drop of sperm – whereupon, lo! He shows himself endowed with the power to think and to argue? And now he argues about Us, and thinks of Us in terms of comparison, and is oblivious of how he himself was created! And so he says ‘Who could give life to bones that have crumpled to dust?’ Say: ‘He who brought them into being in the first instance will give them life once again, seeing that He has full knowledge of every act of creation. . .’ [36:77-79].

Therefore, when that Day comes, no one will deny it. The ones who used to deny it, will not deny it any more, because now it is happening, and no one can deny something observable by them.

[Imam quotes:] “*خَافِضَةٌ رَّافِعَةٌ*” means, “it puts down” and *رَّافِعَةٌ* means, “it puts up”. The Day of Judgment will sort the people putting some into lower ranks and others into higher ranks. That terminology is explained by another Qur’anic verse:

“*يَرْفَعُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ أُتُوا الْعِلْمَ*
دَرَجَاتٍ”

O you who believe, when you are told, ‘Make room for one another in your collective life’, do make room: and in return, God will make room for you in His grace. And whenever you are told, ‘Rise up for a good deed’, do rise up; and God will *exalt by many degrees* those of you who have attained to faith, and above all such as have been vouchsafed true knowledge” [58:11].

The word *rafi‘ah* here means “lifting” – raising up in the sight of God, not a physical lifting up; raised in rank, not physically lifted up. So *خَافِضَةٌ رَّافِعَةٌ* means, when Al-Wāqī‘ah or the Day of Judgment comes, some people will be exalted to higher ranks, and some people will be abased, depending upon their actions and deeds during their lives.

What will be happening when Al-Wāqī‘ah takes

¹⁰ Chapter 36 in the Qur’an

place? **الصَّاخَّةُ** and **الْقَارِعَةُ** are two terms found in some other suras,¹¹ and both of them indicate a loud noise which will affect the ears. Sometimes we hear thunder, for example, and that makes us tremble, because it is a very loud and deafening sound. When a plane takes off, that sound affects our ears, also. So **الصَّاخَّةُ** and **الْقَارِعَةُ** means some sort of exceedingly loud sound will be heard. But, from where? What is the source of that sound? [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The translation is:]

“When the earth (*al-ard*) is shaken with a shaking severe, and the mountains (*al jibāl*) are shattered into countless shards so they become as scattered dust – on that day, then, shall you be divided into three kinds” [56: 4- 6].

Two things will make that deafening sound: *al-ard* – the earth, and *al jibāl* – the mountains. When the earth quakes, or shakes, it will produce that sound because the buildings will be destroyed, the roads will be broken, the tall mountains will be destroyed – destroyed to the extent that they will be like atoms flying on the horizon. The Qur’an says, **يَنْسِفُهَا رَبِّي نَسْفًا**

“And they will ask thee [O Muhammad] what will happen to the mountains when this world comes to an end. Say, ‘My Sustainer will uproot them and scatter them far and wide.’”¹² All these huge rocks will turn into dust; scattered everywhere as dust. That is the end. Then, what is next? Everybody dies; there will be no living soul on earth. This is described in the same way in Chapter Ar-Rahman. [Imam quotes Arabic. The translation is:]

“All that lives on earth or in the heavens is bound to pass away: but forever will abide thy Sustainer’s Self, full of majesty and glory.”¹³

Then, the next step will be resurrection. People will be given life again, and will come in groups, for questioning. The Qur’an describes that scene. Those who denied God’s existence will be driven to *Jahannam*¹⁴ in groups, until they arrive at its doors; and those who were God-conscious will be taken to *Al-Jannah*, or Heaven, until they arrive at its doors. Note the difference in the Arabic expression as it describes the

two:

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاؤُوهَا فَتُحْتَبُ أَبْوَابُهَا – those who were bent on denying the truth will be urged on in groups towards hell till, when they reach it, its gates will be opened.” Of course, the Qur’an is talking to us human beings, and since we understand what “door”, or “gate” means, it describes it in our language. The door of *Jahannam* will be opened as soon as they arrive, as if to indicate “Come on! Quickly! Enter!” – as if it is very keen to have them: they enter it right away; there is no delay. That is what the Arabic expression conveys. But when it comes to *muttaqeen*, or the pious people, **إِذَا جَاؤُوهَا وَفُتِحَتْ أَبْوَابُهَا**. There is “*wa*” here. What is the difference with the *wa*? You know, that *wa* has a very big meaning: it conveys a sense of step-by-step progression, serenity, lingering, and savoring the moment, until, when they arrive at the doors of *Al-Jannah*, they are opened slowly and unhurriedly; the angels at the doors of Heaven receive them with joy, and say, “*Assalām-u Alaykum*,”¹⁵ you have done very well. This is the house of eternity for you. Enter it.” So, the greeting of the Muslims in this life is *Assalām-u Alaykum*, and the greeting of the believers on the Day of Judgment will be *Assalām-u Alaykum*, and the Qur’an says to us, “Their greeting when they meet with their Creator is “*Salām*.”¹⁶ *Al Jannah* is even called *Dār-as-Salām*.¹⁷

Chapter *Al-Wāqī’ah* then classifies the people into three kinds: **أَصْحَابُ الْمَيْمَنَةِ** or the people of *yameen*,¹⁸

أَصْحَابُ الْمَشْأَمَةِ or the people of *shimāal*,¹⁹ and the people who are higher than the two foregoing ranks – **السَّابِقُونَ السَّابِقُونَ**. [The literal translation of these verses is:]

“On that Day, then, shall you be divided into three kinds: the Companions of the Right Hand; what will be the Companions of the Right Hand? And the Companions of the Left Hand; what will be the Companions of the Left Hand? And those foremost [in faith] will be foremost [in the

¹¹ Chapters 80 and 101 respectively

¹² 20:105

¹³ 55:26-27

¹⁴ Hell

¹⁵ Peace be upon you

¹⁶ “Peace.” 36:58

¹⁷ “The House of Peace” 6:127

¹⁸ Right

¹⁹ Left

Hereafter]" [56:8-10].

What are the *Ashāb-ul yameen* and *Ashāb as-shimaal*, or the people of right and the people of left respectively? The word *al-yameen* or *al-maymanah* is taken from the Arabic infinitive *al-yumn* which, when translated into English, means "happiness". So, when the Qur'an says *Ashab-ul maymanah* it means *ashab al-yumn* or "the people of happiness". It is not a literal meaning: those on the right hand, and those others on the left hand. And, even assuming that they are on the right hand and on the left hand, still, this is not applicable to what we do, normally, in our life on this earth. If someone is driving on the left side of the road, as they do in the Commonwealth countries, or writing with his left hand, for instance, you cannot say to him you have been doing this all your life, so you will end up in hell, because you are a "man of left" all your life. Some Muslims make it very difficult, sometimes, by applying that verse in this way to activities of this life. For example, if you are coming out of the mosque, and you put on your left shoe first, then, according to the people who understand this verse literally, the whole world will turn upside down. I remember when we were in Saudi Arabia and it happened to Yahya Shousher.²⁰ He put on his left shoe first, and there was a man there who made his life miserable because of that. That is a wrong interpretation, and, sometimes, some of our people pick on very, very small things and make life difficult for others.

أَصْحَابُ الْمَيْمَنَةِ مَا أَصْحَابُ الْمَيْمَنَةِ: The

word مَا here expresses wonder: what are *Ashab-ul maymanah*? Who are those people? What they are? Must be something great. Exactly like the Qur'an says "*al qāriah mal-qāriah*: The Day of Judgment, what is the Day of Judgment?" It seeks to attract attention to confirm something.

مَشَامَةٌ is derived from *shu'm*. *Shu'm* is pessimism.

أَصْحَابُ الْمَشْأَمَةِ مَا أَصْحَابُ الْمَشْأَمَةِ: What are those people? Who are they?

Then it talks about the third category of people: *As-sābiqūn as-sābiqūn*. The ulama of Islam have analyzed these two words and have not reached a consensus on their meaning. That shows the kind of superior language the Qur'an contains. The human mind can wander through it, but will never reach a final decision. Some ulama say *as-sābiqūn* are the followers of prophets preceding Muhammad: the companions of past prophets; the companions who believed in those past prophets, and their message, at a time when it was not expected of people to believe that quickly. Other ulama say *as-sābiqūn* are the people who believed in Muhammad initially, such as Khadija, who believed immediately after the Prophet recounted to her his first experience with the Angel Jibreel in the Cave of Hira. And AbuBakr believed immediately when the people mentioned to him the incident of *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj*. Ali ibn Abi Talib was the first child to believe in the Prophet, peace be upon him. So, according to one group of scholars, the initial believers from the Prophet's companions are referred to as *as-sābiqūn*, while according to another group of scholars the *as-sābiqūn* are the companions of the earlier prophets, not Muhammad. In general, this shows how a Qur'anic verse could be interpreted differently. Both meanings can occur to the human mind. And this does not mean that the two groups should argue with each other and quarrel with each other, because there is tolerance in Islam: I respect your opinion, but I disagree with you, and I hope that you respect my opinion even if you disagree with me. Nowadays, what we see is the opposite: nowadays, if you don't follow my opinion you are my enemy; but Islam is completely opposite to that.

²⁰ A member of the audience who traveled with Imam to the Middle East to raise funds for the building of the Islamic Center