The Table Spread

al-Māʾidah

A Madinan sūrah, al-Māʾidah contains verses that are considered to be among the last that the Prophet Muhammad received, and all of its verses were revealed after the conquest of Makkah in 8/630 (Z). The sūrah itself is one of the last complete sūrah s revealed to the Prophet (Q), along with al-Fath (Sūrah 48), although al-Naṣr (Sūrah 110) is widely believed to have been the last (IK). The triumphant line in v. 3, This day I have perfected for you your religion, and completed My Blessing upon you, and have approved for you as religion, Submission (Islam), is one of several individual verses variously reported to be the last that the Prophet received before his death (the others are 2:281; 4:176; 9:128–29; 110:1–3). This verse and several others in the sūrah were reportedly revealed in the course of the Prophet’s parting sermon during the Farewell Pilgrimage in 10/632 (Q, Z). According to several reports, the Prophet received this sūrah while he was riding on a camel. The camel could not bear the weight of its descent, however, and the Prophet had to dismount (IK). The sūrah takes its name from the miraculous table spread with food (al-māʾidah) that God sends down to Jesus and his apostles at their request in vv. 112–15.

The opening section of the sūrah, vv. 1–11, contains various ritual and legal prescriptions concerning the pilgrimage, lawful foods, intermarriage, and ritual purity interspersed with reminders of God’s blessings upon the Muslim community and of the necessity of fulfilling the covenant with Him. The tone of these opening lines is religiously triumphant and hopeful and,
with its repeated mention of God’s blessings and His covenant, bears some comparison with Moses’ final sermon as recounted in the Biblical book of Deuteronomy.

The content of this surah is concerned primarily with two major issues: The first is the establishment of a series of ritual and legal rulings considered to be definitive by virtue of the late revelation of the surah. Some assert that no ruling in this surah was ever abrogated (Q), although some claim that parts of v. 2 and v. 106 have been abrogated (IK). The Prophet is reported to have said, “O people! Sūrat al-Māʾīdah is among the last that came down, so whatever it makes licit, you should consider licit, and whatever it makes forbidden, you should consider forbidden” (Q), and a similar statement is attributed to the Prophet’s wife ʿĀʾishah (IK, Q). Its rulings include prescriptions concerning the pilgrimage or ḥajj (vv. 1–2, 95–97), dietary law (vv. 3–5, 87–88), wine and gambling (vv. 90–91), and making bequests (vv. 106–8). This surah also establishes the legal punishments (ḥudūd; sing. ḥadd) for those who wage war against God and His Messenger, and endeavor to work corruption upon the earth (v. 33), understood to pertain to exceedingly violent crimes against the community, including armed robbery and aggression (vv. 33–34), as well as theft (vv. 38–39). The “call to prayer” is also mentioned exclusively in v. 58, although it does not refer to it by its technical term, adhān.

The second and larger issue with which the surah is concerned is the definitive establishment of relations between the Muslim community and the People of the Book. On the one hand, this surah contains much criticism of Jews and Christians. They are accused of breaking or forgetting their covenants with God (vv. 12–14); Christians are chastised for exaggerated claims of divinity for Jesus and his mother (vv. 17–18, 116); and the Israelites’ refusal to obey Moses’ command to fight is recounted (vv. 20–26). At the same time, there is a discussion of the normalizing of relations between Muslims and the People of the Book that also includes the establishment of some boundaries. Thus in v. 5, Muslims are allowed to eat their food and to marry women from among them, thereby allowing for substantial social relations between Muslims and the People of the Book. But in vv. 51–57, political boundaries are established between these communities, as Muslims are warned not to take Jews and Christians as protectors to the exclusion of members of the
Muslim religious community (although Islamic Law does allow treaties of alliance between the Muslim state, or states, and Christian or Jewish political entities). Vv. 41–47 concern the ability of the Prophet, and by extension the authority of the Islamic state, to render judgment in legal disputes among the People of the Book; they also establish that these two communities have their own “law and way” (v. 48) and that they should judge themselves according to their own scriptures (vv. 43–47). Vv. 82–85 present a beautiful portrait of Christian devotion, and the very end of the sūrah recounts Jesus’ extraordinary miracles (vv. 110–15)—including the unique story of the table spread (al-māʾidah) and its descent from Heaven—but concludes with a warning about those Christians who disbelieved thereafter. The sūrah ends with a final statement of God’s complete Sovereignty and Power over all things.

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

1 O you who believe! Fulfill your pacts. Lawful unto you are grazing cattle, save that which is recited unto you, hunted game being unlawful when you are in the state of pilgrim sanctity. Truly God decrees whatsoever He desires. 2 O you who believe! Do not violate the sanctity of the rituals of God, nor the sacred month, nor the offerings, nor the garlands, nor those bound for the Sacred House, seeking the Bounty of their Lord, and [His] Contentment. But when you have left the state of pilgrim sanctity, then hunt for game. And let not hatred for a people who once turned you away from the Sacred Mosque lead you to transgress. Help one another toward piety and reverence; do not help one another toward sin and enmity. And reverence God. Truly God is severe in retribution. 3 Forbidden unto you are carrion and blood, the flesh of swine and that
which has been offered to other than God, that which has been strangled or beaten to death, that which has been killed by falling or has been gored to death, that which has been mangled by beasts of prey—save that which you may purify—and that which is sacrificed on stone altars, and that which you allot with divining arrows; that is iniquity. This day those who disbelieve have despaired of your religion. So fear them not, but fear Me! This day I have perfected for you your religion, and completed My Blessing upon you, and have approved for you as religion, Submission (Islām). But whosoever is compelled by hunger, without inclining toward sin, then surely God is Forgiving, Merciful. They ask thee what is lawful unto them. Say, “Lawful unto you are all good things.” And as for the hunting animals you have taught, teaching them from that which God has taught you, eat of what they catch for you, and mention the Name of God over it. And reverence God; truly God is swift in reckoning! This day, all good things are made lawful unto you. The food of those who have been given the Book is lawful unto you, and your food is lawful unto them. And likewise the chaste women of the believers, and the chaste women of those who were given the Book before you, when you have given them their bridewealth as married women, not as fornicators, nor as paramours. And whosoever rejects belief, his deeds have come to naught, and in the Hereafter he shall be among the losers. O you who believe! When you rise to perform the prayer, wash your faces, and your hands up to the elbows, and wipe your heads and your feet
up to the ankles. If you are in a state of major ritual impurity, then purify yourselves. But if you are ill, or on a journey, or one of you has come from satisfying a call of nature, or you have touched women, and you find no water, then resort to clean earth, and wipe therewith your faces and your hands. God desires not to place a burden upon you, but He desires to purify you, and to complete His Blessing upon you, that haply you may give thanks. And remember God’s Blessing upon you, and His covenant by which He bound you, when you said, “We hear and we obey.” And reverence God. Truly God knows what lies within breasts. O you who believe! Be steadfast for God, bearing witness to justice, and let not hatred for a people lead you to be unjust. Be just; that is nearer to reverence. And reverence God. Surely God is Aware of whatsoever you do. To those who believe and perform righteous deeds, God has promised forgiveness and a great reward. And those who disbelieve and deny Our signs, they shall be the inhabitants of Hellfire. O you who believe! Remember God’s Blessing upon you, when a people were prepared to stretch forth their hands against you, but He withheld their hands from you. Reverence God, and in God let the believers trust. God had made a covenant with the Children of Israel, and We raised among them twelve chieftains. And God said, “I am with you!” Surely, if you perform the prayer, and give alms, and believe in My messengers and support them, and lend unto God a goodly loan, I shall surely absolve you of your evil deeds, and shall cause you to enter Gardens with rivers
running below. But whosoever among you disbelieves thereafter, surely he has strayed from the right way. Then for their breaking of their covenant, We cursed them and hardened their hearts. They distort the meaning of the Word, and have forgotten part of that whereof they were reminded. Thou wilt not cease to discover their treachery, from all save a few of them. So pardon them, and forbear. Truly God loves the virtuous. And with those who say, “We are Christians,” We made a covenant. Then they forgot part of that whereof they were reminded. So We stirred up enmity and hatred among them, till the Day of Resurrection. God will inform them of what they used to do. O People of the Book! Our Messenger has come unto you, making clear to you much of what you once hid of the Book, and pardoning much. There has come unto you, from God, a light and a clear Book, whereby God guides whosoever seeks His Contentment unto the ways of peace, and brings them out of darkness into light, by His Leave, and guides them unto a straight path. They indeed have disbelieved who say, “God is the Messiah, son of Mary.” Say, “Who would have any power over God if He desired to destroy the Messiah, son of Mary, and his mother, and those on earth all together?” Unto God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and whatsoever is between them. He creates whatsoever He will, and God is Powerful over all things. And the Jews and the Christians say, “We are the children of God, and His beloved ones.” Say, “Why then does He punish you for your sins?” Nay, but you are mortals of His creating. He
forgives whomsoever He will, and He punishes whomsoever He will, and unto God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and whatsoever is between them, and unto Him is the journey’s end.  O People of the Book! Our Messenger has come unto you, making things clear to you, after an interval in [the series] of messengers, lest you should say, “There came unto us no bearer of glad tidings, nor any warner.” But there has come unto you a bearer of glad tidings and a warner. And God is Powerful over all things. And when Moses said unto his people, “O my people! Remember God’s Blessing upon you, when He appointed prophets among you, and appointed you kings, and gave you that which He gave unto no other in all the worlds. O my people! Enter the Holy Land, which God has prescribed for you, and do not turn back, or you shall become losers.” They said, “O Moses! In this land are a domineering people. We shall not enter it till they leave it. But if they leave it, we shall enter.” Two men whom God had blessed among those who feared [Him] said, “Enter upon them by the gate, for once you have entered it, you will be victors. And trust in God, if you are believers.” They said, “O Moses! We shall never enter it, so long as they remain therein. So go forth, thou and thy Lord, and fight! We shall sit here.” He said, “My Lord! I have no power over anyone save myself and my brother; so separate us from the iniquitous people!”  Then verily it shall be forbidden them for forty years, while they shall wander on the earth. So grieve not for the iniquitous people.” And recite unto
them, with truth, the account of Adam’s two sons, when they each offered a sacrifice, and it was accepted from one of them, though not accepted from the other. One said, “I will surely slay you!” [The other] said, “God accepts only from the reverent.  Even if you stretch forth your hand against me to slay me, I shall not stretch forth my hand against you to slay you. Truly I fear God, Lord of the worlds.  I desire that you should be burdened with my sin and your sin and so become one of the inhabitants of the Fire. Such is the recompense of the wrongdoers.”  Then his soul prompted him to slay his brother, and he slew him, and thus came to be among the losers.  Then God sent a crow, scratching the earth, to show him how he might conceal his brother’s nakedness. He said, “Oh, woe unto me! Am I not able to be even as this crow and conceal my brother’s nakedness?” And he came to be among the remorseful.  For this reason, We prescribed for the Children of Israel that whosoever slays a soul—unless it be for another soul or working corruption upon the earth—it is as though he slew mankind altogether, and whosoever saves the life of one, it is as though he saved the life of mankind altogether. Our messengers have certainly come unto them with clear proofs. Yet even after that, many of them are prodigal on the earth.  Verily the recompense of those who wage war against God and His Messenger, and endeavor to work corruption upon the earth is that they be killed or crucified, or have their hands and feet cut off from opposite sides, or be banished from the land. That is their disgrace in this world, and in the Hereafter theirs shall be a
great punishment, save those who repent before you overpower them. And know that God is Forgiving, Merciful. O you who believe! Reverence God, and seek the means to approach Him, and strive in His way, that haply you may prosper. Truly those who disbelieve, were they to possess all that is on the earth and the like of it besides with which to ransom themselves from the punishment of the Day of Resurrection, it would not be accepted from them. And theirs shall be a painful punishment. They will wish to come forth from the Fire, but they shall not come forth from it. And theirs shall be a lasting punishment. As for the male thief and the female thief, cut off their hands as a recompense for what they have earned, as an exemplary punishment from God. Truly God is Mighty, Wise. But whosoever repents after his wrongdoing, and makes amends, God will relent unto him. Truly God is Forgiving, Merciful. Dost thou not know that unto God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth? He punishes whomsoever He will, and He forgives whomsoever He will. And God is Powerful over all things. O Messenger! Let them not grieve thee, those who hasten unto disbelief, those who say, “We believe” with their mouths, while their hearts believe not, and those who are Jews, who listen to lies and to others who have not come to thee. They distort the meaning of the word, saying, “If you are given this, then take it, but if you are not given this, then beware!” For whomsoever God desires that he be tried, thou hast no power to avail him aught against God. They are those whose hearts God desired not to purify.
Theirs is disgrace in this world, and in the Hereafter they shall have a great punishment. Those who listen to lies, and consume what is unlawful—if they come to thee, then judge between them, or turn away from them. If thou turnest away from them, they will not harm thee in the least. But if thou judgest, judge between them with justice. Truly God loves the just. And how is it that they come to thee for judgment, when they have the Torah, wherein is God’s Judgment? Yet even after that, they turn their backs, and they are not believers. Truly We sent down the Torah, wherein is a guidance and a light, by which the prophets who submitted [unto God] judged those who are Jews, as did the sages and the rabbis, in accordance with such of God’s Book as they were bidden to preserve and to which they were witnesses. So fear not mankind, but fear Me! And sell not My signs for a paltry price. Whosoever judges not by that which God has sent down—it is they who are disbelievers. And therein We prescribed for them: a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, and for wounds, retribution. But whosoever forgoes it out of charity, it shall be an expiation for him. Whosoever judges not by that which God has sent down—it is they who are wrongdoers. And in their footsteps, We sent Jesus son of Mary, confirming the Torah that had come before him, and We gave him the Gospel, wherein is a guidance and a light, confirming the Torah that had come before him, as a guidance and an exhortation to the reverent. Let the people of the Gospel judge by what God has sent down
therein. Whosoever judges not by that which God has sent down—it is they who are iniquitous. 48 And We have sent down unto thee the Book in truth, confirming the Book that came before it, and as a protector over it. So judge between them in accordance with what God has sent down, and follow not their caprices away from the truth that has come unto thee. For each among you We have appointed a law and a way. And had God willed, He would have made you one community, but [He willed otherwise], that He might try you in that which He has given you. So vie with one another in good deeds. Unto God shall be your return all together, and He will inform you of that wherein you differ. 49 And judge between them in accordance with what God has sent down, and follow not their caprices. And beware of them, lest they tempt thee away from some part of that which God has sent down unto thee. And if they turn away, know that God desires to smite them for some sin of theirs, and surely many among mankind are iniquitous. 50 Is it the judgment of the Age of Ignorance that they seek? And who is fairer in judgment than God, for a people who are certain. 51 O you who believe! Take not Jews and Christians as protectors. They are the protectors of one another. And whosoever takes them as protectors, surely he is of them. Truly God guides not wrongdoing people. 52 Yet thou seest those in whose hearts is a disease hastening to them, saying, “We fear lest a change of fortune should befall us.” It may be that God will grant victory, or a command from Him. And then they shall be remorseful for that which they secretly harbored in their souls. 53 And
those who believe will say, “Are these the ones who swore by God with their most solemn oaths that they were with you?” Their deeds have come to naught, and they have become losers. 54 O you who believe! Whosoever among you should renounce his religion, God will bring a people whom He loves and who love Him, humble toward the believers, stern toward the disbelievers, striving in the way of God, and fearing not the blame of any blamer. That is the Bounty of God, which He gives to whomsoever He will. And God is All-Encompassing, Knowing. 55 Your protector is only God, and His Messenger, and those who believe, who perform the prayer and give alms while bowing down. 56 And whosoever takes as his protector God, and His Messenger, and those who believe—the party of God, they are the victorious! 57 O you who believe! Take not as protectors those who take your religion in mockery and as play, from among those who were given the Book before you, or the disbelievers, and reverence God, if you are believers. 58 And when you call to prayer, they take it in mockery and as play. That is because they are a people who do not understand. 59 Say, “O People of the Book! Are you vengeful toward us for no other reason than that we believe in God and in that which has been sent down unto us and in that which was sent down before, and because most of you are iniquitous?” 60 Say, “Shall I inform you of something worse than that by way of recompense from God? Whomsoever God has cursed and upon whom is His Wrath, and among whom He has made some to be apes and swine, and who worship false deities,
such are in a worse situation, and further astray from the right way.”  

When they come to you, they say, “We believe.” But they certainly entered with disbelief and they have certainly left with it, and God knows best what they were concealing. Thou seest many of them hastening to sin and enmity, and consuming what is forbidden. Evil indeed is that which they were doing. Why do the sages and the rabbis not forbid them from their sinful speech and their consuming what is forbidden? Evil indeed is that which they were working. The Jews say, “God’s Hand is shackled.” Shackled are their hands, and they are cursed for what they say. Nay, but His two Hands are outstretched, He bestows as He wills. Surely that which has been sent down unto thee from thy Lord will increase many of them in rebellion and disbelief. And We have cast enmity and hatred among them till the Day of Resurrection. As often as they ignite a flame for war, God extinguishes it. They endeavor to work corruption upon the earth. And God loves not the workers of corruption. Had the People of the Book believed and been reverent, We would surely have absolved them of their evil deeds, and caused them to enter Gardens of bliss. Had they observed the Torah and the Gospel and that which was sent down unto them from their Lord, they would surely have received nourishment from above them and from beneath their feet. There is a moderate community among them; but as for many of them, evil is that which they do! O Messenger! Convey that which has been sent down unto thee from thy Lord, and if thou dost not, thou wilt not have conveyed His message. And
God will protect thee from mankind. Surely God guides not disbelieving people. Say, “O People of the Book! You stand on naught till you observe the Torah and the Gospel, and that which has been sent down unto you from your Lord.” Surely that which has been sent down unto thee from thy Lord will increase many of them in rebellion and disbelief. So grieve not for disbelieving people. Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Sabeans, and the Christians—whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness, no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve. We indeed made a covenant with the Children of Israel, and sent messengers unto them. Whenevsoever a messenger brought them what their souls did not desire, some they would deny and some they would slay. And they supposed that there would be no trial, and so became blind and deaf. Then God relented unto them; then [again] many of them became blind and deaf. And God sees whatsoever they do. They certainly disbelieve, those who say, “Truly God is the Messiah, son of Mary.” But the Messiah said, “O Children of Israel! Worship God, my Lord and your Lord.” Surely whosoever ascribes partners unto God, God has forbidden him the Garden, and his refuge shall be the Fire. And the wrongdoers shall have no helpers. They certainly disbelieve, those who say, “Truly God is the third of three,” while there is no god save the one God. If they refrain not from what they say, a painful punishment will befall those among them who disbelieved. Will they not turn to God in repentance and seek His forgiveness? And God is
Forgiving, Merciful.  The Messiah, son of Mary, was naught but a messenger—messengers have passed away before him. And his mother was truthful. Both of them ate food. Behold how We make the signs clear unto them; yet behold how they are perverted!  Say, “Do you worship, apart from God, that which has no power to benefit or harm you, when it is God Who is the Hearing, the Knowing?”  Say, “O People of the Book! Do not exaggerate in your religion beyond the truth, and follow not the caprices of a people who went astray before, and led many astray, and strayed from the right way.”  Those who disbelieved among the Children of Israel were cursed by the tongue of David and Jesus son of Mary. That was because they disobeyed and used to transgress. They would not forbid one another from the wrong they committed. Evil indeed is that which they used to do. Thou seest many of them allying with those who have disbelieved. Evil indeed is that which they have sent forth for their souls: the anger of God is upon them, and in punishment shall they abide. And had they believed in God and the Prophet, and that which was sent down unto him, they would not have taken them as protectors, but many of them are iniquitous. Thou wilt surely find the most hostile of men toward those who believe to be the Jews and those who ascribe partners unto God. And thou wilt find the nearest of them in affection toward those who believe to be those who say, “We are Christians.” That is because among them are priests and monks, and because they are not arrogant. And when they hear that which was sent down
unto the Messenger, thou seest their eyes overflow with tears because of the truth they recognize. They say, “Our Lord, we believe, so inscribe us among the witnesses. And how should we not believe in God and the truth that has come unto us, when we desire that our Lord should cause us to enter among the righteous people?” So God rewarded them for what they said with Gardens that have rivers running below, to abide therein, and that is the recompense of the virtuous. As for those who disbelieved and denied Our signs—such shall be the inhabitants of Hellfire! O you who believe! Do not forbid the good things that God has made lawful unto you, and do not transgress. Surely God loves not transgressors. Eat of that which God has provided you that is lawful and good, and reverence God, in Whom you are believers. God will not take you to task for that which is frivolous in your oaths, but He will take you to task for the oaths you have pledged in earnest. The expiation thereof is the feeding of ten indigent people with the equivalent of that which you feed your own family, or clothing them, or freeing a slave. And whosoever finds not [the means], let him fast for three days. That is the expiation for your oaths when you have sworn [them]. But keep your oaths. Thus does God make clear unto you His signs, that haply you may give thanks. O you who believe! Wine, and gambling, and idols, and divining arrows are but a means of defilement, of Satan’s doing. So avoid it, that haply you may prosper. Satan desires only to sow enmity and hatred among you through wine and gambling, and to turn
you away from the remembrance of God, and from prayer. Will you, then, refrain? Obey God and obey the Messenger, and be wary. But if you turn away, then know that only the clear proclamation is incumbent upon Our Messenger. There is no blame upon those who believe and perform righteous deeds for that which they have eaten, so long as they are reverent, and believe, and perform righteous deeds, then are reverent and believe, and then are reverent and virtuous. And God loves the virtuous.

O you who believe! God will surely try you with something of the game you obtain with your hands and your spears, so that God may know the one who fears Him unseen. So whosoever transgresses after that, his shall be a painful punishment.

O you who believe! Slaughter not any game while you are in a state of pilgrim sanctity. And [for] the one among you who slaughters it intentionally, a recompense of cattle, the like of that which he slaughtered, as judged by two just men among you, as an offering brought to the Ka‘bah, or the expiation of feeding the indigent, or the equivalent of this in fasting, that he may taste the evil consequences of his affair. God has forgiven that which is past, but whosoever relapses, God will take vengeance upon him, and God is Mighty, Possessor of Vengeance.

The game of the sea and the food thereof is made lawful unto you—an enjoyment for you and for the travelers—but the game of the land is forbidden unto you so long as you remain in a state of pilgrim sanctity. And reverence God, unto Whom you shall be gathered.
mankind, and the sacred month, and the offerings, and the garlands, this that you might know that God knows whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is on the earth, and that God is Knower of all things. Know that God is severe in retribution, and that God is Forgiving, Merciful. Only the proclamation is incumbent upon the Messenger. And God knows what you disclose and what you conceal. Say, “The good and the wicked are not equal, though the abundance of the wicked may impress you.” So reverence God, O possessors of intellect, that you may prosper. O you who believe! Ask not about things which, if they were disclosed to you, would trouble you. And if you ask about them while the Quran is being sent down, they will be disclosed to you. God has pardoned this, and God is Forgiving, Clement. A people before you asked about these things, then came to be disbelievers therein. God has not established ḥām, or ṣāʾibah, or waṣīlah, or ḫām. But those who disbelieve fabricate lies against God, and most of them do not understand. And when it is said unto them, “Come unto that which God has sent down, and unto the Messenger,” they say, “Sufficient for us is that which we have found our fathers practicing.” What! Even if their fathers knew naught and were not rightly guided? O you who believe! You have charge of your own souls. He who is astray cannot harm you if you are rightly guided. Unto God shall be your return all together, and He shall inform you of what you used to do. O you who believe! The witness between you, when death approaches one of you, at the time of the bequest,
shall be two just men among you, or two from among other than yourselves if you are traveling upon the earth when death befalls you. Detain the two of them after the prayer, and let them both swear by God, if you doubt [them], “We will not sell it for any price, though he were a kinsman, nor will we conceal the witness of God, for then we would surely be among the sinners.”  But if it is discovered that the two of them are guilty of sin, then two others shall stand in their place, from those most entitled as claimants, and swear by God, “Indeed, our witness is truer than their witness, and we have not transgressed, for then we would surely be among the wrongdoers.” Thus it is more likely that they will bear true witness, or fear that their oaths will be countered by oaths thereafter. And reverence God and listen. God guides not iniquitous people. The day when God will gather the messengers and say, “What response did you receive?” they will say, “We have no knowledge. Truly it is Thou Who knowest best the things unseen.” Then God will say, “O Jesus son of Mary! Remember My Blessing upon thee, and upon thy mother, when I strengthened thee with the Holy Spirit, that thou mightest speak to people in the cradle and in maturity; and when I taught thee the Book, Wisdom, the Torah, and the Gospel; and how thou wouldst create out of clay the shape of a bird, by My Leave, and thou wouldst breathe into it, and it would become a bird, by My Leave; and thou wouldst heal the blind and the leper, by My Leave; and thou wouldst bring forth the dead, by My Leave; and how I restrained the Children of Israel from thee, when thou didst bring them
clear proofs, and those who disbelieved among them said, ‘This is naught but manifest sorcery.’ And when I inspired the apostles to believe in Me and in My messenger, they said, ‘We believe. Bear witness that we are submitters.’” When the apostles said, “O Jesus son of Mary! Is thy Lord able to send down to us from Heaven a table spread with food?” He said, “Reverence God, if you are believers.” They said, “We desire to eat from it, so that our hearts may be at peace, and we may know that thou hast spoken truthfully unto us, and we may be among the witnesses thereto.” Jesus son of Mary said, “O God, our Lord! Send down unto us a table from Heaven spread with food, to be a feast for us—for the first of us and the last of us—and a sign from Thee, and provide for us, for Thou art the best of providers.” God said, “I shall indeed send it down unto you. But whosoever among you disbelieves thereafter, I shall surely punish him with a punishment wherewith I have not punished any other in all the worlds.” And when God said, “O Jesus son of Mary! Didst thou say unto mankind, ‘Take me and my mother as gods apart from God?’” He said, “Glory be to Thee! It is not for me to utter that to which I have no right. Had I said it, Thou wouldst surely have known it. Thou knowest what is in my self and I know not what is in Thy Self. Truly it is Thou Who knowest best the things unseen. I said naught to them save that which Thou commanded me: ‘Worship God, my Lord and your Lord.’ And I was a witness over them, so long as I remained among them. But when Thou didst take me [to Thyself], it was Thou Who wast the Watcher over
them. And Thou art Witness over all things. If Thou punisheth them, they are indeed Thy servants, but if Thou forgiveth them, then indeed Thou art the Mighty, the Wise.” God said, “This is the Day wherein the truthful shall benefit from their truthfulness. For them shall be Gardens with rivers running below, abiding therein forever. God is content with them, and they are content with Him. That is the great triumph.” Unto God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and whatsoever is therein, and He is Powerful over all things.

Commentary

1 O you who believe! Fulfill your pacts. Lawful unto you are grazing cattle, save that which is recited unto you, hunted game being unlawful when you are in the state of pilgrim sanctity. Truly God decrees whatsoever He desires.

1 This verse is widely understood as being addressed to Muslims in general; it enjoins them to fulfill their pacts, meaning to complete in full the religious commitments they have made to God (cf. 2:40; 3:76; 13:20; 16:91; 33:23). Some early commentators, however, considered it to be addressed to the People of the Book as well, or to the People of the Book specifically, since they are all enjoined to fulfill their pacts or their covenant with God (see 2:40). The prominent early Ḥadīth scholar Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124/741) claims to have seen a letter that the Prophet sent to the Christians of Najrān containing the first four verses of this sūrah (Q), indicating that they were addressed to Christian believers as well. Some have suggested the pacts here may also refer to the pacts of alliance and protection made among the Arabs in pre-Islamic times (Q, Ṭ).

However, as this is the opening verse of a sūrah largely concerned with Muslim religious obligations as well as the covenantal obligations of all the People of the Book, it most likely refers to fulfilling religious pacts with God generally (Ṭ), which may also include the proper conclusion of marital, commercial, and treaty agreements, which are governed by religious Law (Q; see 2:177; 6:152,
where this phrase is used in relation to religiously prescribed social transactions).

Grazing cattle (*bahīmat al-anʿām*) designates camels, cows, and sheep (*Ṭ*), grazing animals commonly eaten in Arabia, and, according to some commentators, includes all forms of such animals, even their young and those in the womb when the mother is slaughtered (*Ṭ*). It may also include wild grazing animals, such as deer (*Ṭ*), although others argue these animals fall under the rules governing hunted animals (*Q*). The exception, *save that which is recited unto you* (see also 22:30), refers to carrion, the blood of the lawful animals (*Ṭ*), any animal over which the Name of God has not been mentioned, and any animal that has been slaughtered according to idolatrous rites (vv. 3–4; 6:118–19, 121, 145) or been killed in an unacceptable manner (see v. 3). The flesh of swine is also forbidden (v. 3), but is not considered to be among the exceptions to lawful grazing cattle, specifically, as swine are not “grazing” animals (*Ṭ*).

This sūrah, revealed partly in the context of the Prophet’s Farewell Pilgrimage (in 10/632), contains several passages related to the pilgrimage (*ḥajj*). Thus the verse also mentions the ban on hunting game while performing the pilgrimage, which requires a special state of purity (*iḥrām*) that prohibits hunting or slaughtering animals, with the exception of sea creatures (see 5:95–96).

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2 O you who believe! Do not violate the sanctity of the rituals of God, nor the sacred month, nor the offerings, nor the garlands, nor those bound for the Sacred House, seeking the Bounty of their Lord, and [His] Contentment. But when you have left the state of pilgrim sanctity, then hunt for game. And let not hatred for a people who once turned you away from the Sacred Mosque lead you to transgress. Help one another toward piety and reverence; do not help one another toward sin and enmity. And reverence God. Truly God is severe in retribution.

2 This verse is one of several that give Islamic endorsement to various sacred elements and rituals associated with Makkah and the pilgrimage to it that were already part of the pre-Islamic practices of the Arabs (see also v. 97; 2:196–203; 22:26–36). One should not violate or breach the sanctity of the rituals (*shaʿāʾir*) of God. *Shaʿāʾir* can mean either “rituals” or “ritual places.” The verse is
understood as an injunction to recognize all the sacred rites and places associated with the pilgrimage (Ṭ, Z), to avoid all things prohibited in a state of pilgrim sanctity (ibrām; Ṭ), and to fulfill all the elements of the pilgrimage ritual (Q, Ṭ). Although some suggest that the prohibition against violating the rituals (shaʿāʾir) of God relates to following all Divine commands and prohibitions in general (Ṭ), and in later Islamic usage shaʿāʾir can refer to other sacred rites, the Quran employs shaʿāʾir exclusively in connection with the Makkah pilgrimage, denoting various rites and sacred places associated with it; see 2:158 (where the term refers specifically to the sacred hills of Ṣafā and Marwah); 22:32, 36. The sanctity of the precincts of Makkah, and especially the Sacred Mosque, constituted of the Kaʿbah and the ḥaram that surrounds it, was observed by refraining from violence or bloodshed in this area, which was recognized as a protected sanctuary (see 3:97c), although 2:191 allows fighting in the sacred precinct if the Makkans initiate hostilities there.

In addition to the spatial sanctity of these places, the verse mentions the temporal sanctity of the sacred month. Some say that the reference to the sacred month in the singular here denotes all four sacred months during which there was traditionally an abstention from violence in the pre-Islamic period: Rajab, Dhuʿl-Qaʿdah, Dhuʿl-Hijjah, and Muḥarram, the seventh, eleventh, twelfth, and first months, respectively, on the lunar Arab (and also later the Islamic) calendar (Q, R). The Quran here and elsewhere (see 2:217; 9:36) upholds the sanctity of these months in the Islamic context as well. During the years of successive battles between the Madinan Muslims and the Makkah idolaters, the Quran allowed for fighting during these months under certain conditions (see 2:194, 217). Some consider the sanctity of these months to be abrogated (at least in relation to fighting idolaters) by 9:5, which enjoined Muslims, Slay the idolaters wheresoever you find them. But in some of the last verses revealed, including the present verse, v. 97, and 9:36, as well as in an address given by the Prophet during his Farewell Pilgrimage (IK), the sanctity of these months is upheld. Some consider the sacred month in the present verse to refer specifically to Dhuʿl-Ḥijjah, the month in which the major pilgrimage is performed (Z); while others suggest that it may mean Rajab (R, Ṭ) or Dhuʿl-Qaʿdah, specifically (Ṭ).

The verse then forbids specifically harming or destroying the offerings (the livestock set aside to be ritually slaughtered at the conclusion of the pilgrimage; see also 2:196; 5:97; 48:25) or failing to observe their inviolate status as sacrificial offerings, symbolized by the garlands traditionally placed around the necks of these animals (see also v. 97). Such garlands were reportedly used during the pre-Islamic pilgrimage as well, and their use was considered to have been originally an Abrahamic practice (Q).

Finally, one must allow those bound for the Sacred House (i.e., pilgrims to the Kaʿbah) to travel in safety and peace. According to some, this verse was revealed
after the conquest of Makkah, but before the revelation of 9:1–28, which banned the idolaters from the Ka‘bah pilgrimage. During this brief interim, the idolaters were not prohibited from performing the major or minor pilgrimage to the Ka‘bah. One report claims that this verse was revealed in relation to a man who had once come to Madinah from Yamāmah feigning interest in embracing Islam, but who later left without making a religious commitment. On his way out of Madinah, he led away some camels belonging to the Madinan Muslims. After the conquest of Makkah, but before idolaters had been banned from the pilgrimage, some Muslims saw this same man coming to make the pilgrimage to the Ka‘bah, leading the stolen camels with garlands around their necks, indicating that they had been dedicated for sacrifice at the Ka‘bah. When they recognized him and the stolen camels, they questioned whether to allow him to proceed or not, and this verse was revealed, indicating that they were not to interfere with the man or the sacrificial camels (Q, Ṣ, W). After the revelation of 9:1–28, however, the idolaters were no longer afforded the protections of the sacred months or pilgrim status (IK, Q); this represents a clear example of naskh (abrogation), where one Quranic verse abrogates the legal ruling (but not the text) of another verse. The universal nature of the protections of the sacred months and pilgrim status implied in this verse were therefore considered abrogated, insofar as they no longer pertained to idolaters (Ṭ).

Those bound for the Sacred House are described as seeking both the Bounty of their Lord, and [His] Contentment, indicating that people may make the ḥajj hoping both for worldly gain through trade or commerce conducted in the process and for the spiritual purpose of pleasing God and being rewarded accordingly (Ṭ). Those people who once turned the believers away from the Sacred Mosque are the former Makkan idolaters, who had driven the Muslims from their homes in Makkah and had thwarted the Muslims’ attempt to perform the lesser pilgrimage (‘umrah) to the Sacred Mosque in 6/628, during the height of the struggle between the Madinan Muslims and the Makkan idolaters (Ṭ, 48:25; see also 2:114; 8:34; 22:25 for criticism of those who bar others from the mosques of God or the Sacred Mosque, specifically). These former Makkan idolaters had gone from being the sworn enemies of the Muslim community to being its newest members in a matter of days, and the believers are warned not to allow any lingering ill will or hatred for them to lead them to transgress the rights of the new converts or (in 5:8) to be unjust in their dealings with them.

The Prophet made this point emphatically in his own treatment of the new Makkan converts. Shortly after Makkah had fallen to the Muslims and the Makkans embraced Islam en masse after having fought the Muslims for years, the Prophet led the Muslims, including these new converts, into battle against an aggressive tribe to the south of Makkah. When the battle was won, the Prophet made the extraordinary gesture of giving all of the considerable spoils of this battle exclusively to the new Makkan Muslims, to assure them of their full standing in the Muslim community and
Forbidden unto you are carrion and blood, the flesh of swine and that which has been offered to other than God, that which has been strangled or beaten to death, that which has been killed by falling or has been gored to death, that which has been mangled by beasts of prey—save that which you may purify—and that which is sacrificed on stone altars, and that which you allot with divining arrows; that is iniquity. This day those who disbelieve have despaired of your religion. So fear them not, but fear Me! This day I have perfected for you your religion, and completed My Blessing upon you, and have approved for you as religion, Submission (Islām). But whosoever is compelled by hunger, without inclining toward sin, then surely God is Forgiving, Merciful.

3 According to most commentators, this verse was revealed as the Prophet was delivering his Farewell Sermon on Mt. ṬArafāt, which occurred on a Friday during his final pilgrimage (Q, Ṭ, W). For this reason and because of its reference to the “perfection of the religion,” it is one of several verses thought to be among the last the Prophet received (the others are 2:281; 4:176; 9:128–29; 110:1–3). A minor opinion expressed by Mujāhid, however, held that it was revealed at the time of the conquest of Makkah (Q).

The prohibition that this verse places on certain foods is similar to what is found in several other verses (2:173; 6:118–19, 145; 16:115) in that it prohibits animals already found dead (carrion), the blood, even of licit animals, the flesh of swine, and meat that has been consecrated or sacrificed in the name of some being other than God. The present verse is likely the last of the food prohibition verses to be revealed because it provides more detail than earlier verses about the modes of death that prohibit an animal from being consumed. This verse establishes explicit prohibition on meat that has been killed by strangulation, whether deliberate, as reportedly practiced by some idolaters (Ṭ), or accidental (Q, Ṭ). It is also illicit to
eat animals that have been beaten to death, a practice reportedly used by Arab idolaters in pre-Islamic times (Q). Similar prohibitions apply also to hunted game. For example, a hadīth states that if one hits an animal with a blunt arrow, which kills it without piercing it, the animal is considered “beaten to death” and may not be eaten (Q). The verse similarly prohibits eating animals that have died from a high fall, whether accidental or deliberately caused (Q), or that have been gored to death. Animals killed and partially eaten by other animals are also not legitimate to eat.

An exception to all these cases is made for that which you may purify (dhakkaytum, from dhakkā), meaning in this case an animal that one might properly slaughter before its death. Thus an animal that has been injured by any of the means mentioned above, but that one is able to properly slaughter before it has died from its injuries, is licit to eat (Q, Ṭ). The exception does not apply to the cases of carrion or the flesh of swine, which are prohibited absolutely (Ṭ). The verb dhakkā, which can be a synonym for the verb “to sacrifice” (dhabiḥa), used in the next phrase, comes from a root meaning “fragrant,” “delicious,” or “pure.” Some have suggested that its connection to ritual slaughtering is that the meat of an animal slaughtered in this way becomes fragrant and pleasing to eat, since with the blood drained it dries quickly; it may also be related to the idea that the meat of the animal becomes purified thereby (Ṭ).

Proper ritual slaughtering in Islamic dietary law requires that the animal’s throat be slit, preferably severing the jugular vein, in order to kill it quickly and cause the least suffering, and the blood must be allowed to drain out. One must mention the Name of God over the animal and face it in the direction of the canonical prayer (qiblah; Q). Additionally, the animal should be treated with kindness: the killing should not be preceded by a violent struggle, the animal should be well rested, and it should be killed with a sharp knife, so that it causes the least pain (Q). One should also turn one’s face away from the animal when slaughtering it and remain aware that it is only by God’s permission that one may kill and eat the animal (Q). All of these practices have the effect of removing the slaughterer’s sense of absolute power over the animal and of maintaining the comfort and dignity of the animal to the extent possible.

For hunted game, the Name of God should be pronounced before launching the weapon or unleashing the dog intended to hunt the game, and the game must be killed in a manner that causes blood to flow. Finally, the reported idolatrous practices of sacrificing animals on stone altars (ʿalā nuṣub)—or alternately, “to idols,” since nuṣub can also mean “idols”—or dividing the portions with divining arrows likewise make the meat illicit to eat. Cf. 5:90, where “divining arrows” are prohibited along with other idolatrous practices (see also 5:90c). That is iniquity may refer particularly to this last practice (Q), but more likely refers to any transgression of the limits established in this verse (Q, Ṭ).
This day those who disbelieve have despaired of your religion means that on the day this verse was revealed (according to most, on the Day of Ārafāh during the Prophet’s final pilgrimage) the disbelievers have lost all hope of turning the Muslims away from their faith (Q, Ṭ). Fear them not, but fear Me is also found in 2:150; 3:175; 5:44 (variant). The “perfection” of the religion and the “completion” of blessing are widely understood as referring either to the fact that the Prophet’s pilgrimage to Makkah established the rites and procedures for the final Muslim ritual obligation, the ḥajj, or to the completion of the Quranic revelation, although not all agree that this was the last verse to be revealed. Some claim that no other ritual or legal rulings were revealed to the Prophet after this day (Ṭ, Tū, Z), although others assert that additional verses containing legal, but not ritual, prescriptions were revealed after this verse (Q).

According to some early Shiite traditions, this verse was reportedly revealed at the site of Ghadīr Khumm in Juhfah, where the Prophet and the rest of the pilgrims had halted on their return journey to Madinah after the final pilgrimage. At this site, the Prophet reportedly declared, “For whomever I am his master (mawlatā), ālī is [also] his master (mawlatā).” Both Sunni and Shiite sources record this event, but it holds special significance for Shiites, who understand the Prophet’s statement on this occasion to have been a direct nomination of ālī as spiritual and political leader of the Muslim community after the Prophet, an interpretation not accepted by Sunnis. According to these Twelver Shiite traditions, the “perfection of religion” and “completion of blessing” in this verse are thus said to refer to the establishment of spiritual authority (walāyah/wilāyah or imāmah) in the line of ālī (Qm, Ṭū). Some Shiite traditions, however, place both the Prophet’s statement regarding ālī and this verse at the time of the Prophet’s Farewell Sermon at Ārafāh, rather than at the site of Ghadīr Khumm on the return trip to Madinah.

The “perfection of religion” and “completion of blessing” may also refer to the victory over the idolaters and idolatry and their decisive banishment from the pilgrimage (Ṭ, Z). Approved for you as religion, Submission (Islām) could also be rendered, “chosen for you as religion, Submission (Islam).” Here, Islām is widely considered to be used in the confessional sense of those who follow the religion revealed in the Quran through the Prophet Muhammad, rather than in the universal sense of submission to God that the terms islām and muslim have elsewhere in the Quran (see, e.g., 2:131; 3:19, 85; and the essay “The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions”). According to a report in al-Ṭabarī, however, islām here indicates the full submission of one’s heart to the principle of Divine Oneness (tawḥīd) and represents a level higher than merely the verbal affirmation of this truth.

The end of the verse returns to the issue of lawful food, reminding those who are compelled by hunger to violate the laws prescribed for the proper killing and consumption of meat, but intend no sin by it, that God is Forgiving and Merciful
toward them. Similar exemptions for those compelled in exceptional circumstances
to consume unlawful meat can be found in all major verses dealing with dietary law
(see 2:173; 6:119, 145; 16:115). For a general exemption for those facing religious
compulsion, see 16:106.

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4 They ask thee what is lawful unto them. Say, “Lawful unto you are all good things.” And as for the hunting animals you have taught, teaching them from that which God has taught you, eat of what they catch for you, and mention the Name of God over it. And reverence God; truly God is swift in reckoning!

4 Here and in v. 5, the Quran mentions the lawfulness of the many good things (ṭayyibāt), most specifically food, that God has provided for the believers, and elsewhere they are enjoined to partake of these things (16:114) and to be grateful for them (8:26). The freedom to enjoy all good things, however, is tied to notions of Divine favor and the spiritual purity of a religious community throughout the Quran. After the manna and quails were sent to Moses and the Israelites in the desert, they were instructed, Eat of the good things We have provided you (2:57; 20:81), and in 3:93 the Quran states, All food was lawful unto the Children of Israel, save what Israel had forbidden for himself, before the Torah was sent down. As a response to the “wrongdoing” of the Israelites, however, this changed, and certain things that had been lawful for them were made unlawful (4:160; 7:160).

Jesus, who is said by the Quran to have brought a message of spiritual renewal for the Israelites and to have confirmed the Torah, is thus also said to have come to make lawful unto them part of that which was forbidden unto them (3:50); and the Prophet Muhammad is similarly said to have come to make good things lawful for “them,” which, in context, seems to refer to the Jews, although it also applies to Muslims. Although the Quran criticizes those who consume “unlawful things” (5:42, 62–63), it also criticizes those who deem “unlawful” what God has made lawful (5:87; 7:32; 10:59; 16:116), thus restricting God’s favor and provision without warrant. Insofar as such arbitrary restrictions are attributed to the Arabian idolaters, they may be understood as a sign of the spiritual decadence of a religious community.

This verse allows the use of dogs or other animals and birds, such as falcons, in
hunting licit game. Some Islamic traditions suggest that dogs are unclean, but this
verse explicitly allows keeping dogs trained for hunting and, by extension, those
that provided protection or other valuable services to human beings; it is thus
understood that in such cases their unclean status does not apply (Ṭ, W). *Teaching
them from that which God has taught you* refers to teaching them to obey human
command and to catch prey without eating from it (JJ, Ṭ). The prey that hunting
animals catch is licit to eat, so long as one has pronounced the Name of God before
releasing the hunting animal or over the prey that has been caught, if it is still alive.
However, if the prey has been caught by a wild or unknown animal or if the hunting
animal has eaten part of the prey, then it is not licit to eat it, either because it
indicates that the animal has not been properly trained (Ṭ), as required by this
verse, or because it indicates that the animal is considered to have caught it for
itself. Some say, however, that if the hunting animal has consumed some of the
animal, but one reaches it before the prey has died, and can thus mention the Name
of God over it and slaughter it properly, then it is licit according to the exception
established in v. 3 (Ṭ).

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5 This day, all good things are made lawful unto you. The
food of those who have been given the Book is lawful unto
you, and your food is lawful unto them. And likewise the
chaste women of the believers, and the chaste women of
those who were given the Book before you, when you have
given them their bridewealth as married women, not as
fornicators, nor as paramours. And whosoever rejects
belief, his deeds have come to naught, and in the Hereafter
he shall be among the losers.

5 The statement that the lawfulness of all good things is established on *this
day* echoes the statements in v. 3, *this day those who disbelieve have despairsed or
your religion,* and *this day I have perfected for you your religion.* It similarly
carries the triumphal tone of the full establishment of the Islamic community and its
laws and rites and implicitly links the lawfulness of *all good things* for them to the
Divine favor and approval for the community in v. 3. Some assert that *this day*
refers not to the day the verse was revealed, but to the era of Islam itself (Q).
Although various idolatrous practices related to killing and consuming meat were
prohibited in v. 3, the present verse explicitly permits Muslims to eat of the food of the People of the Book—understood by most to mean the meat slaughtered by Jews and Christians specifically here—clearly distinguishing the practices of the latter from those of the idolaters. A notable exception to this interpretation is found in the early Shiite commentary tradition, which considered the food of those who have been given the Book to refer to vegetables, grains, or other foods that did not require ritual slaughtering (Qm, Ṭū). Yet, most reports interpret the license to eat the food of the People of the Book rather broadly; some argue that even food that has been presented as an offering to a church (Ṭ) or slaughtered in the name of the Messiah (Q) is licit. Some early Companions, however, including ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib and ʿĀʾishah, held that if one heard a Jew or Christian slaughtering an animal in the name of the something other than God, one should not eat it (Q), since 6:121 commands: And eat not of that over which the Name of God has not been invokea (Q).

The status of the People of the Book is further distinguished from that of the idolaters with regard to marriage. The Quran explicitly forbids marrying idolaters (2:221; 60:10–11), but this verse allows intermarriage with the People of the Book, suggesting the possibility of extensive social relations between Muslims and members of these religious communities. Chaste women translates muḥṣanāt, which may mean either “chaste women” or “free women,” and the term has been interpreted differently in this context. When it is interpreted to mean “chaste,” it is understood to refer to the woman’s present status, not necessarily to her past actions, for women who had been unchaste but then repented regained their “chaste” status and were eligible for marriage (T). According to several reports, ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb warned that once a woman had repented of such actions, those past actions were not to be brought up in future proposals for marriage (T). Some commentators understand chaste women of those who were given the Book to mean “free women of those who were given the Book” and argue that Muslim men may marry only free Jewish and Christian women, since the Quran only grants explicit permission to marry believing (i.e., Muslim) slave women (2:221; 4:25; Ṭ). When Muslim men marry women from the People of the Book, they must marry them properly according to Islamic Law, giving them their bridewealth and not taking them as fornicators—those with whom one commits open acts of fornication—or as paramours—those with whom one secretly engages in illicit sexual relations (see 4:25c, where the same conditions apply to marrying believing slave women). This prohibition does not include the case of mutʿah, a form of temporary marriage allowable under Shiite law and accepted by at least some Sunni jurists.

Despite the license Muslim men are given to marry Jewish and Christian (and according to some, Zoroastrian) women, some questioned the advisability of the practice when there were sufficient numbers of Muslim women to marry. Twelver
Shiite tradition usually discouraged marrying Jewish or Christian women, except in cases of an absence of Muslim marriage partners or when such women were taken as temporary, not permanent, wives (Ṭū), although the practice nevertheless exists among Shiites (for a discussion of temporary marriage and the Shiite perspective on it, see 4:24c).

Some early commentators questioned whether the license to eat the food of the Jews and Christians and to marry their women was limited to those Jews and Christians who followed their own religious practices properly or applied more broadly to all those who resided within the Islamic state. Most commentators, however, interpreted this to apply to all Jews and Christians (Q, Ṭ). Although other religious communities, such as Zoroastrians, had protected status under Islamic rule, they did not always enjoy the same religious standing as Jews and Christians under Islamic Law. Although some Islamic scholars considered them to be among the People of the Book, many did not; for the latter they were simply a protected religious community. The permission granted here to eat the food and marry the women of those who have been given the Book is therefore widely considered to apply only to Jews and Christians, although some Muslim scholars embraced a broader definition of “People of the Book” that would also include Zoroastrians or other non-Abrahamic religions.

The verse concludes with the assertion that whosoever rejects belief, his deeds have come to naught, reflecting the Islamic theological principle that in the absence of proper belief good deeds have no reward in the next life (cf. 2:217; 3:21–22; 6:88; 7:147; 9:17; 18:105; 33:19; 39:65).

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6 O you who believe! When you rise to perform the prayer, wash your faces, and your hands up to the elbows, and wipe your heads and your feet up to the ankles. If you are in a state of major ritual impurity, then purify yourselves. But if you are ill, or on a journey, or one of you has come from satisfying a call of nature, or you have touched women, and you find no water, then resort to clean earth, and wipe therewith your faces and your hands. God desires not to place a burden upon you, but He desires to purify you, and to complete His Blessing upon you, that haply you may give thanks.
This verse describes the three ways in which Muslims perform ablutions to purify themselves ritually before prayer. The first and most common manner of ablution described here is the *wuḍūʾ*, which is required in cases of minor ritual impurity caused by various forms of bodily discharge or by having slept or otherwise lost consciousness. All schools of law consider the *wuḍūʾ* obligatory before the five daily canonical prayers as well as prior to performing other prayers, such as the funeral prayer or supererogatory prayers. The schools of law are also unanimous in recommending that one perform the *wuḍūʾ* prior to reciting the Quran or Ḥadīth, entering a mosque, making the call to prayer (adhān), eating, and sleeping; upon rising; and after speaking angry or immoral words. The Shāfīʿī school also recommends the *wuḍūʾ* after bleeding, eating slaughtered meat, visiting tombs, or carrying the dead.

*When you rise to perform the prayer, wash* might seem to indicate that one must make the ablution anew whenever one comes to prayer, regardless of one’s existing state of ritual purity, although Islamic Law requires it only when one is in a state of ritual impurity. Many commentators explain that when this verse was revealed, it required a new ablution before every prayer, regardless of one’s state of purity; after the conquest of Makkah, however, the Prophet performed a single ablution before the noon prayer and went on to pray subsequent prayers without renewing his ablution. This was thus taken as an abrogation of the previous requirement of renewing one’s ablutions before each prayer (Q, T). On the basis of this Prophetic precedent, one was required to renew ablutions only after losing one’s state of ritual impurity or awaking from sleep, although renewing one’s ablution before each prayer remains a meritorious act (T).

The *wuḍūʾ*, based on this verse and interpreted according to Prophetic practice, is generally understood to entail washing the face, including rinsing the nostrils and the mouth; washing the hands and arms to just above the elbow; wiping the head, including the ears; and washing or wiping the feet up to the ankles. In addition to the specific acts mentioned in the verse, the Mālikī, Shāfīʿī, Ḥanbalī, and Twelver Shiite (Jaʿfarī) schools of law also required that the *wuḍūʾ* be preceded by a statement of intention (*niyyah*) and that washing of the various bodily parts be done in immediate succession. The Shāfīʿī, Ḥanbalī, and Jaʿfarī schools also require that the various parts be washed in the order that they are mentioned in the Quranic verse, and the Mālikī school requires that the areas be rubbed, rather than merely having water poured over them. Some commentators, such as al-Qurṭubī, also held that every performance of *wuḍūʾ* must include all of these steps, in the order they are presented in the verse.

The commentators debated whether one needed to “wash” the feet or merely “wipe” them, since *your feet up to the ankles* seems to be the direct object of the immediately preceding verb, *wipe*. Many commentators preferred this reading, including Ibn ʿAbbās and other Companions as well as Twelver Shiite
commentators (Ţs). Others, however, argued that *and wipe your heads* was a self-contained phrase, while the phrase *your feet up to your ankles* was an object governed by the more distant verb *wash*. A report from the Companion Anas ibn Mālik states that “wiping” the feet is what the verse requires, but “washing” is the Prophet’s *Sunnah* (Q, Ţ). The two opinions are sometimes reconciled by arguing that, although the literal meaning of the verse is that one must wipe one’s feet, it is “washing” that is really meant (Q, Ţ). Some less common reports claim that the Prophet had merely wiped his sandals in the course of his ablutions, giving rise to the minority opinion that one needed only to “wipe the shoes” to complete this final part of the ablution. The major Sunni schools of law generally require washing the feet on the basis of the predominant Prophetic *Sunnah* and the consensus of the community (Q), but wiping the shoes is accepted in the Shiite Ja‘farī school and sometimes practiced in cold winter months among Sunni Muslims as well.

The second form of ablution indicated in this verse is the *ghusl*, which is required in the case of *major ritual impurity*, such as that caused by menstruation, sexual intercourse, seminal discharge, and according to some, touching a dead body. This requires taking a full bath or shower in which all body parts are washed in a ritual manner.

Finally, the third manner of purification mentioned here, a practice known as *tayammum*, applies when illness or a lack of water makes performing ablutions with water unhealthy or impossible. In such cases, Muslims may ritually purify themselves by wiping their faces and hands with *clean earth* (for more on this practice see 4:43 and commentary). *God desires not to place a burden upon* those for whom performing a full ablution with water would present a hardship or impossibility and thus ordains this alternative form of purification (*tayammum*) under certain circumstances. The idea that God ordains some flexibility in ritual obligations for the benefit of those experiencing hardship is found elsewhere in the Quran (see, e.g., 2:185, 280).

*Complete His Blessing* echoes v. 3, suggesting that both the purification through ablution and the easing of this requirement in certain circumstances are indicative of God’s favor toward the Islamic community. Although the ablutions detailed in this verse are means of ritual, rather than directly moral, purification, several *ḥādīth* link the performance of the ablution and the removal of sins (Q, Ţ). The Prophet said, “Whosoever performs ablution, and does it in a beautiful way, his sins shall leave his body, even from under his fingernails”; and a well-known *hadīth* states that purity is “half of faith” (Q).

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elope God’s Blessing upon you, and His
covenant by which He bound you, when you said, “We hear and we obey.” And reverence God. Truly God knows what lies within breasts.

7 God’s Blessing on the Muslim community is invoked here, as it is in vv. 3, 6, and 11, tying these verses together as a collective and triumphal statement of special Divine favor revealed toward the end of the Prophet’s life and mission. Al-Rāzī asserts that to remember God’s Blessing is not necessarily a command meant to spur a new recollection of these blessings after a time when they were forgotten, but rather a call to remember and be thankful for these blessings always, lest the future success and prosperity of the community accustom Muslims to ease and lead them to forget the Divine source of the blessings.

The community is also called to remember His covenant by which He bound them. Most consider this covenant to refer collectively to the various pacts of allegiance (bayʿah) that the community had made with the Prophet: the pacts concluded with the future Emigrants and Helpers to obey the Prophet and defend and support the Muslim community just prior to the Prophet’s migration from Makkah to Madinah in 1/622; the renewal of that pledge of allegiance (bayʿah) on the outskirts of Makkah during the community’s unsuccessful attempt to make pilgrimage and in the midst of tense treaty negotiations with the Makkah idolaters at Ḥudaybiyah in 6/628; and any individual pledge (bayʿah) made to the Prophet to obey him and follow his guidance (R, T, Z). All such pledges to obey the Prophet can be considered a covenant with God (His covenant in this verse) in light of the Quranic assertion that whoever obeys the Prophet obeys God (4:80) and the Quranic statement addressed to the Prophet regarding the pact at Ḥudaybiyah: Truly those who pledge allegiance unto thee pledge allegiance only unto God. The Hand of God is over their hands (48:10; R).

A minor tradition, primarily associated with Mujāhid, interprets His covenant here as a reference to the pretemporal covenant and testimony given by all human beings (or “children of Adam”) that they recognize God as their Lord (7:172; R, T). Some prominent commentators cast doubt on this interpretation by noting that the verse is not addressed generally to the children of Adam, but to the Muslim community specifically (R), and that this discussion is followed in v. 12 by a contrasting account of the Israelites’ failure to keep their covenant with God, indicating that here the reference is to a covenant with the Muslim community exclusively (T; see also the essay “The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions”). The idea that God knows one’s inner thoughts and intentions is found throughout the Quran, and the final warning given here, that God knows what lies within breasts, is repeated in 3:119, 154; 8:43; 11:5; 29:10; 31:23; 35:38; 39:7; 42:24; 57:6; 64:4; 67:13. This warning can be understood as a reminder not to
break the covenant either outwardly or inwardly and secretly, for God knows and holds one accountable for what lies within breasts (R).

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8 O you who believe! Be steadfast for God, bearing witness to justice, and let not hatred for a people lead you to be unjust. Be just; that is nearer to reverence. And reverence God. Surely God is Aware of whatsoever you do.

8 The believers are commanded to be steadfast for God, bearing witness to justice, which echoes, in inverted form, the injunction in 4:135: Be steadfast maintainers of justice, witnesses for God. In both verses, and especially in their juxtaposition, a fundamental connection is established between standing for God—that is, bearing witness to His Oneness and His Lordship (R)—and standing for justice. Both verses also assert that in standing for God and for justice one should not be influenced by human considerations, such as loyalty to family, questions of social status (4:135), or hatred and enmity (here). Cf. v. 2, where the believers are similarly warned not to let hatred for a people lead them to transgress; transgressing the limits set by God is one definition of injustice (R). To stand for justice, even against one’s family or toward one’s enemies is to stand for God, and being just is nearer to reverence. To be just toward one’s enemies means to refrain from treating even the idolaters in a manner that transgresses the limits established in Divine Law, including killing their women and children or breaking treaties with them (R, Z). Some note that this constitutes a strong warning against injustice of any kind, for if one is prohibited from acting unjustly even toward disbelievers, how must God view injustice toward fellow believers (R, Z)? See also 3:18: God bears witness that there is no god but He, as do the angels and the possessors of knowledge, upholding justice.

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9 To those who believe and perform righteous deeds, God has promised forgiveness and a great reward.

10 And those who disbelieve and deny Our signs, they shall be the inhabitants of Hellfire.
9–10 The reminder at the end of the previous verse that God is Aware of whatsoever you do serves simultaneously as a promise to the obedient and a warning to the sinful (R). In these two verses, the promise for the righteous believers is identified as forgiveness and a great reward; the warning for the sinful as Hellfire. Divine forgiveness is promised in several places for those who demonstrate a fundamental righteousness (see, e.g., 4:31; 25:70).

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11 O you who believe! Remember God’s Blessing upon you, when a people were prepared to stretch forth their hands against you, but He withheld their hands from you. Reverence God, and in God let the believers trust.

11 The believers are reminded for the final time in this opening part of the sūrah to remember God’s Blessing upon them. The people who were prepared to stretch forth their hands against them may refer to the idolaters who tried to oppress and kill the Muslims. But God withheld their hands in that He prevented the idolaters, who initially had greater numbers and strength than the Muslims, from overwhelming them and destroying their community (R). Several other reports indicate that this verse was revealed in relation to a specific incident in which the Prophet’s enemies attempted to kill him when he was in a defenseless state. In one report he was resting in the shade of a tree and had removed his weapon. A Bedouin came and seized the weapon and attempted to kill him with it, but was prevented by God from doing so despite his efforts (R, W).

Others claim that it was revealed when the Prophet and his close Companions went to the Banū Naḍīr, a Jewish clan of Madinah, seeking assistance in paying the wergild (diyah) for two men whom his men had killed in error. The leader of the clan invited them in and feigned hospitality while secretly plotting to kill the unarmed Prophet. The Archangel Gabriel came, however, to inform the Prophet of the danger, and he left before they could carry out their plot (R, Ṭ, W). Al-Ṭabarī favors this latter interpretation, noting that immediately after this verse the sūrah begins to discuss the Children of Israel and their wrongdoing.

It seems more likely, however, that this verse is meant to remind the Muslims of God’s protection of them and their fledgling community against the powerful forces against them, since it is addressed to the believers as a whole, and the pronoun “you” is plural throughout the verse, indicating that it refers to God’s continued protection of the Muslims as a community. Moreover, the verse can be understood as concluding the opening section of this sūrah that addresses the Muslim
community as a whole, reminding them of God’s various blessings and favors toward them.

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12 God had made a covenant with the Children of Israel, and We raised among them twelve chieftains. And God said, “I am with you!” Surely, if you perform the prayer, and give alms, and believe in My messengers and support them, and lend unto God a goodly loan, I shall surely absolve you of your evil deeds, and shall cause you to enter Gardens with rivers running below. But whosoever among you disbelieves thereafter, surely he has strayed from the right way.

12 Having enjoined the Muslim believers to remember God’s Blessing upon them (vv. 7, 11) and to fulfill their covenant (v. 11), the Quran now turns to offer a cautionary tale about the Jews and the Christians, who also had a covenant with God, which they broke, despite the blessings that God had bestowed upon them (R). The covenant with the Children of Israel is mentioned several times in the Quran and, as here, is usually followed by a discussion of their later unfaithfulness to that covenant or wrongdoing generally; see 2:40, 63, 83, 93; 4:154; 5:70; 7:169. The twelve chieftains is a reference to the leaders of the twelve Israelite tribes (see 7:159–60, where the community of Moses is said to have been divided into twelve tribes by God; also 2:60). Chieftain translates naqīb, a term that in later Islamic usage sometimes referred to the local head of a family of descendants of the Prophet (shurafāʾ); in Sufism, naqīb became a title of authority given to certain leaders within the Sufi orders and sometimes to the saintly forebears of a particular order.

In the context of the present verse, early commentators commonly connect these twelve chieftains to the story of the Israelites being called to enter the land that they had been promised in vv. 21–25. The twelve were said to be trustworthy men chosen as witnesses or guarantors for their respective tribes by Moses, who then asked them to enter the land in advance of the rest of the Israelites to scout out the territory (T, Z). They returned and, against Moses’ orders, reported the terrifying might of the land’s Canaanite inhabitants, which led to the Israelites’ refusal to enter and fight for the land in v. 22 (Z). The Biblical Joshua (Yashīrāh ibn Nūn) is
said to have been the representative of the prophet Joseph’s clan among these twelve (T) and to have been one of the two men (in v. 23) who remained willing to enter the land despite the might of its inhabitants (R, T, Z). Some suggest that the twelve chieftains here may also refer to twelve righteous kings (Z) or judges (R) through whom God led the Israelites. The following promise from God, *I am with you!* and the subsequent injunction to fulfill religious obligations may be addressed to the twelve chieftains (R), to all Israelites and their descendants (T), or likely to both.

Although the Quran recognizes ritual and legal differences between religious communities, the performance of prayer and the giving of regular alms (*zakāh*) are frequently represented as essential practices in the religions of the People of the Book and indeed in all true religious communities (2:43, 83, 177, 277; 4:77, 162; 7:156; 19:31, 55; 21:73; 22:41; 24:37; 98:5). According to this verse and others, part of the covenant required them to recognize future prophets, and their failure to recognize certain prophets, including Muhammad, and their rejection, indeed slaying, of other unnamed prophets are consistently part of the Quranic critique of the Jews (see, e.g., 2:89–91; 4:155–57; 5:70).

The concept of lending God *a goodly loan* is a metaphor for expending one’s effort and wealth for the cause of religion; cf. 2:245; 57:11, 18; 64:17; also 73:20, where, as here, it is connected with the duties of prayer and the giving of alms (*zakāh*).

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13 Then for their breaking of their covenant, We cursed them and hardened their hearts. They distort the meaning of the Word, and have forgotten part of that whereof they were reminded. Thou wilt not cease to discover their treachery, from all save a few of them. So pardon them, and forbear. Truly God loves the virtuous.

13 The Israelites’ *breaking of their covenant* is a common theme in the Quran (see 2:63, 83, 93; 4:155; 7:169), as it is in the Hebrew scriptures. Those Israelites who were unfaithful to their covenant are here said to be *cursed* by God, as they are elsewhere (see 2:88; 4:46–47; 5:64; also 5:78, where they are said to have been *cursed by the tongue of David and Jesus son of Mary*). Being cursed by God is understood by some to mean being exiled from His Mercy (Z).

God is also said here to have *hardened their hearts* in response to their
breaking the covenant. The idea that people’s hearts may be “hardened” or “sealed,” often as a result of their own wrongdoing, such that they are no longer receptive to Divine messages or to the “remembrance of God,” is found throughout the Quran; see 2:7, 74; 6:43; 39:22; 57:16; also 10:88, where Moses asks God to seal the hearts of Pharaoh and his people (God is similarly said to harden Pharaoh’s heart throughout the Biblical account in Exodus). Some understand “hardened” hearts to indicate hearts rendered “impure” through a mixture of belief and disbelief; this idea is metaphorically linked to the phenomenon of precious metals, such as gold and silver, which in their pure state are relatively soft and malleable, but become “hardened” when they are mixed with other metals to form an alloy (R, Ṭ, Z).

The charge that the Israelites or the Jews distort the meaning of the Word (referred to in Arabic as tahrīf) is understood to mean either that they rearranged the words of scripture in a manner that altered their meaning or that they misrepresented or misinterpreted the meaning of the scriptural words. This is said to be a clear manifestation of their hardened hearts (Z); see also 2:75c; 4:46c; v. 41. Forgetfulness is a common human vice, beginning with Adam (20:115), and necessitating a long series of prophetic “reminders” and Divine “signs,” which are themselves also often forgotten; see v. 14; 6:44; 7:165; 20:126.

The mention of their treachery likely relates to the incident alluded to in v. 11 with a people . . . prepared to stretch forth their hands against you, which is widely interpreted as referring to a plot by the Jewish Banū Naḍīr clan (Ṭ; see 5:11c). Despite fears or even expectations of treachery, Muslims are enjoined to pardon them, and forbear (cf. 2:109; 3:159; 7:199; 24:22). A widely cited report from the early commentator Qatādah (d. early second/eighth century) asserts that the injunction to pardon them, and forbear was abrogated by 9:29, which calls for fighting disbelieving People of the Book until they had paid the jizyah, or tax that non-Muslim communities were to pay to the Islamic state (IK, Ṭ, Th). In the chronology of revelation, however, this sūrah likely postdates the revelation of 9:29, since Sūrah 9 was reportedly revealed in the year 9/631, while the present sūrah was revealed—according to many, in its entirety—during the Prophet’s Farewell Pilgrimage in 10/632, at the very end of his life. Some commentators do not accept, therefore, that 9:29 abrogates the injunction to pardon the Jews in the present verse, arguing that the two verses are not necessarily mutually exclusive, since once the People of the Book have agreed to pay the jizyah, there is no reason one cannot forgive them for past transgressions (R, Ṭ). See also the essay “Conquest and Conversion, War and Peace in the Quran.” The present verse, following shortly after permission is given to eat the food and marry the women of the People of the Book, may reflect a broader intention in this very late sūrah to reestablish normative and peaceful relations between Muslims and the People of the Book. God loves the virtuous is repeated in 2:195; 3:134, 148; 5:93.
And with those who say, “We are Christians,” We made a covenant. Then they forgot part of that whereof they were reminded. So We stirred up enmity and hatred among them, till the Day of Resurrection. God will inform them of what they used to do.

This verse asserts that Christians, like Israelites/Jews, entered into a covenant with God and, like them, forgot a part of the “reminder” that had been given them. The consequences, however, are different. Whereas the Israelites’ failure with regard to the covenant leads to spiritual punishment by God, the Christians’ forgetting of the covenant results in enmity and hatred among them, alluding to the factionalism or sectarianism within the Christian community spurred by theological differences (IK, Ṭ) or to hatred between Jews and Christians—although the latter is a less likely interpretation in this context, since the verse seems to be addressed exclusively to the Christians (Ṭ). Factionalism is also presented as a mode of Divine punishment in 6:65, although not in relation to Christians specifically. That God will inform them of what they used to do on the Day of Resurrection is consistent with other passages of the Quran suggesting that religious differences will remain, perhaps providentially, until there is Divine clarification in the Hereafter; see 2:113; 3:55; 5:48; 6:164; 10:93; 16:92, 124; 22:69; 32:25; 39:3, 46.

O People of the Book! Our Messenger has come unto you, making clear to you much of what you once hid of the Book, and pardoning much. There has come unto you, from God, a light and a clear Book.

For other allusions to the People of the Book or others “hiding” part of the scriptures, see 2:42, 140, 146, 159, 174; 3:71, 187; 6:91. Several commentators explain, by way of example, that the Jews and Christians hid those parts of their scripture that referred to the coming of Muhammad (see 7:157, which asserts that the Prophet was inscribed in the Torah and Gospel) as well as those passages that established the punishment of stoning for adultery (JJ, Ṭ, Z). The Prophet brought
the latter to light when a Jewish adulterer and adulteress were brought to him for judgment; after learning that stoning was the punishment prescribed for this offense in the Torah, he followed it and ordered them to be stoned; see 3:23c. The concept of light (nūr) is frequently associated with the guidance that comes through the prophets and revelation (6:91; 7:157; 21:48; 42:52; 64:8), and in 9:32–33 and 61:8–9 the Quran mentions those who would try to extinguish the light of God, which, in context, could be read as an attempt to conceal Divine Revelation. In this verse, the light sent from God may be understood as referring to Muhammad (Ṭ), and the clear Book, to the Quran; see 12:1; 26:2; 27:1; 28:2; 43:2; 44:2 for other references to the Quran as the clear Book, although the term is also used for God’s Knowledge of all things (see, e.g., 10:61). Alternately, both light and clear Book may be taken as references to the revelation of the Quran (Z).

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whereby God guides whosoever seeks His Contentment unto the ways of peace, and brings them out of darkness into light, by His Leave, and guides them unto a straight path.

16 The most sincere and meritorious of believers are those who do righteous deeds seeking the Contentment (or “good pleasure”) of God; see 2:207, 265; 4:114; 5:2; 59:8. Ways of peace translates subul al-salām, which could also mean the path or way to God, since Peace (al-Salām) is one of the Names of God (Ṭ). God’s bringing the believers out of darkness into light is mentioned also in 2:257; 14:1, 5; 33:43; 57:9; 65:11. Here darkness translates zulumāt (lit. “darknesses”), which is always contrasted with “light,” singular, suggesting a connection between darkness and the “multiplicity” of this world, on the one hand, and, on the other, a connection between light (which is always singular in the Quran) and the Oneness of God and of His Guidance through revelation, both of which are identified with light itself (“Light,” or Nūr, is one of the Divine Names, and in 24:35 God is described as the Light of the heavens and the earth). The straight path is associated with the life lived in accord with Divine Guidance throughout the Quran (see, e.g., 1:6; 2:142; 3:101; 6:87; 43:61; 67:22).

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They indeed have disbelieved who say, “God is the
Messiah, son of Mary.” Say, “Who would have any power over God if He desired to destroy the Messiah, son of Mary, and his mother, and those on earth all together?” Unto God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and whatsoever is between them. He creates whatsoever He will, and God is Powerful over all things.

17 This verse is one of several places (cf. 4:171; 5:72, 75, 116; 9:31) where the Quran criticizes the Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus, who here is referred to simply as the Messiah (al-Masīḥ); see also 4:157, 171–72; 5:72, 75; 9:30–31. The reference to his mother in this verse also suggests criticism of those who would worship or divinize Mary (see also v. 116). The denial of the divinity of Christ (and Mary) is issued through an assertion of God’s destructive and creative Power (He creates whatsoever He will), the implication being that Jesus and Mary, along with those on earth all together, are God’s creations, and so also subject to His ability to destroy them at will. He creates whatsoever He will (cf. 24:25; 30:54; 42:49) also indicates that He may create in any manner that He will, including creating a human being, like Jesus, who was without a biological father (R, Z). In their being created by God, Jesus and Mary are no different from other human beings (Z). Who would have any power over God translates fa-man yamliku min Allāhi shay’an, an idiomatic expression containing the verb yamliku, meaning literally “to own” and, by extension, to control. This is then contrasted (in the Arabic) with the assertion Unto God belongs sovereignty (li’Llāhi mulk), since mulk (“sovereignty”) is derived from the same root as yamliku. Since Christ’s divinity is refuted through reference to God’s all-encompassing creative power over His creatures, the verse also implicitly refutes the Christian doctrine that Christ was not created (“begotten, not made,” according to the Nicene Creed).

Theologically oriented commentators, including al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī, observe that, although the verse is criticizing Christians who would limit God’s Being to His manifestation in a human being (Christ), this is not the actual teaching of Christian doctrine. Thus when the Quran criticizes the belief that “God is the Messiah,” one could argue that it is not criticizing official Christian doctrine (which might say that the Messiah is God, but not that God is the Messiah), but rather an exaggerated and thus unorthodox understanding of Christ’s nature. Al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī, however, argue that, in its attribution of creative power and ruling authority to Christ as well as in its assertion of the incarnation of God in Christ’s human form, Christian doctrine is theologically tantamount to such an understanding, even if it is not the explicit teaching of most Christians.

645
And the Jews and the Christians say, “We are the children of God, and His beloved ones.” Say, “Why then does He punish you for your sins?” Nay, but you are mortals of His creating. He forgives whomsoever He will, and He punishes whomsoever He will, and unto God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and whatsoever is between them, and unto Him is the journey’s end.

The Quran frequently criticizes the idea that God has sons or daughters (2:116; 6:100; 9:30; 10:68; 17:40, 111; 18:4; 19:35, 88–93; 21:26; 25:2; 37:149, 153; 39:4; 43:16, 81–82; 52:39; 72:3). This is the only place, however, where the Quran criticizes Jews and Christians for referring to themselves as the children of God, an idea mentioned explicitly in the Christian Gospels (see, e.g., Matthew 5:9; Luke 20:36; John 11:52). In the Hebrew scriptures, the Israelite people are collectively referred to as the “firstborn son” of God (see Exodus 4:22–23), and as the royal representatives of Israel, both David and Solomon are referred to as the “son” of God (see Psalm 2:7; 1 Chronicles 28:6). According to Ibn ʿAbbās, this verse was intended as a response to some Madinan Jews who rejected the Prophet’s calls to Islam and warnings of Divine punishment by asserting that, as the children of God, and His beloved ones, they had nothing to fear (Ṭ, Z). Although the Quran does not criticize their claim as an explicit assertion of divinity for individual Jews and Christians (JJ, R), the verse refutes this general claim, at least partly, in the same manner that it refutes claims of divinity for Jesus or Mary, that is, by reminding Jews and Christians that they are mortals and beings of His creating and so bounded by a birth and a death over which they have no ultimate control.

The commentators are generally aware that the Jewish and Christian claim to be children of God is not a literal one; rather, they assert that it is a metaphorical and/or a genealogical extension of their respective claims about Ezra and Jesus being His “sons” (IK, R, Z; cf. 9:30). Some cite the Gospel passage in which Jesus says to his followers, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father” (John 20:17), as a possible source for this misunderstanding (IK), although the metaphorical idea of God as “Father” is found in various places in the Judeo-Christian scriptures and seems to have been well established in the Judaic context prior to the Gospel accounts. Al-Rāzī links Jewish and Christian claims to be the children of God to
implicit claims of special Divine Mercy and favor that they are said to have made for themselves according to other passages in the Quran (cf. 2:111, 135). The verse also refutes the claim of Jews and Christians that they are the children of God, and His beloved ones by arguing that such a status would preclude His punishing them for their sins—something that, the commentators observe, both Christians and Jews accept, even if Jews believe they will be punished for only a brief period (cf. 2:80; 3:24).

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19 O People of the Book! Our Messenger has come unto you, making things clear to you, after an interval in [the series] of messengers, lest you should say, “There came unto us no bearer of glad tidings, nor any warner.” But there has come unto you a bearer of glad tidings and a warner. And God is Powerful over all things.

19 The Quran repeatedly asserts the clarity of the prophetic messages, signs, and books, and it indicates that one of the purposes of prophecy is precisely to clarify spiritual and ethical matters made obscure by human error or falsification; see v. 15, where Muhammad makes clear what the People of the Book once hid of the Book; and 16:64 and 43:63, where Muhammad and Jesus, respectively, are said to have made clear that wherein they differed. Interval here translates fathrah, used to denote a temporary cessation of revelation either between different prophets and prophetic eras or sometimes between instances of revelation sent to Muhammad (see 17:106). Here it refers to the span of time between the prophetic missions of Jesus and Muhammad. Some but not all commentators assert that there were no other prophets sent between these two major prophets (IK). Others claim that there were four minor prophets sent in the interim: three in the Judeo-Christian line, perhaps the “message bearers” alluded to without name in 36:14 (see 36:13–14 and commentary), and the fourth, an Arab prophet whose name was Khālid ibn Sinān al-ʿAbsī (Q, Z). The role of the prophets as “bearers of glad tidings” and “warners” is mentioned throughout the Quran (see, e.g., 2:213; 4:165; 6:48; 18:56). Many prominent early Quran commentators among the Prophet’s Companions asserted that the verse was revealed as a response to some of the Jews of Madinah who claimed that no “bearer of glad tidings or warner” had been sent by God after Moses (Ṭ).
And when Moses said unto his people, “O my people! Remember God’s Blessing upon you, when He appointed prophets among you, and appointed you kings, and gave you that which He gave unto no other in all the worlds.

Both Muslims and the followers of Moses or other prophets are told to remember God’s Blessing upon them (2:231; 5:7, 11; 14:6; 35:3). The prophets He appointed among them would here refer to Abraham and the other prophets among his descendants. Moses’ statement that God had appointed them kings is said to refer to His having given them sovereignty over their own affairs and having freed them from the tyranny of Pharaoh (Q). That God gave the Israelites that which He gave unto no other in all the worlds is similar to other statements of the unique Divine favor the Israelites enjoyed (cf. 2:47, 122; 7:140; 45:16) and may refer to the miraculous manna and quails through which they were sustained in the desert (see 2:57, 7:160, 20:80), to the many prophets and signs that He sent to them (Q), or to the fact that He granted them many good things of both this world and the next (IK). The commentators point out that this unique favor was enjoyed by the Israelites “in their time” (IK, Q) and thus was not absolute.

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O my people! Enter the Holy Land, which God has prescribed for you, and do not turn back, or you shall become losers.”

Cf. Numbers 13–14 for the Biblical counterpart to this account.

Some commentators explicitly connect the Holy Land (al-`ard al-muqaddasah) ordained for the Israelites (cf. 7:137) with Abraham, indicating that he was shown this land and given it as an inheritance for his progeny (R, Z)—which from an Islamic point of view would also include his Arab Muslim descendants through Ishmael. It is interesting that the Quran describes this land as blessed in a universal way, and as the “Holy Land”—a term used widely today in Judeo-Christian contexts for this land, but one that is used only very rarely in the Bible itself. The exact location of this Holy Land mentioned in the Quran is unclear. Various reports locate it in Sinai, Syria, Jericho, or an area encompassing parts of Syria, Palestine, and Jordan (R, Ṭ, Z); others identify it simply as the land of the Jerusalem sanctuary (al-bayt al-muqaddas; Z). Al-Ṭabarī claims that the
exact location is unknowable, but that it lies somewhere between the Euphrates and Nile rivers (although not encompassing all of this area).

Some commentators assert that God prescribed \((kataba,\) which could also mean “inscribed”) the Israelites’ right to reside in this land in the Preserved Tablet, which is understood by many as referring to the repository of eternal Divine Knowledge and Revelation \(\text{(R,} \text{Ṭ,} \text{Z; cf. 85:22)}.\) The universal sacredness of this land is alluded to elsewhere, as in 17:1, which mentions the Farthest Mosque (referring to the site of the ancient Jewish Temple in Jerusalem), saying that its precincts We have blessed; and 21:71, And We delivered him (Abraham) and Lot to the land that We blessed for all peoples, although some believe the latter verse refers to Makkah. Do not turn back may be a command not to retreat from the land without fighting for it, but it may also be rendered “do not turn your backs,” that is, on the Divine command and obedience to the prophet Moses.

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They said, “O Moses! In this land are a domineering people. We shall not enter it till they leave it. But if they leave it, we shall enter.”

22 After the Divine to enter the land, Moses reportedly chose twelve men, one from each of the twelve tribes of Israel (see 5:12c), to enter the land in advance and report to him on its inhabitants. While there, the advance party witnessed the great size and might of the inhabitants. According to some reports, they were discovered and seized by one of the land’s inhabitants, but released thereafter so that they could warn their own people not to enter the land \(\text{(Ṭ)}.\) When they returned, they reported to Moses, O Moses! In this land are a domineering people \((jabbārīn).\) Jabbār may also be rendered “tyrant,” in that it denotes a person of overwhelming force or power, able to compel others to do his will. Al-Jabbār is also one of the Divine Names (mentioned in 59:23), conveying God’s ultimate power over all others. When the term is applied to a human being, it has the negative sense of tyrant and oppressor, because the exercise or assumption of such power over others belongs rightly to God alone \(\text{(Ṭs).}\) Despite Moses’ assurance that God would lead them to victory if they were righteous and obedient to their prophet (cf. v. 12), the Israelites refused to enter.

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23 Two men whom God had blessed among those who
feared [Him] said, “Enter upon them by the gate, for once you have entered it, you will be victors. And trust in God, if you are believers.”

23 Two men among the twelve sent to assess the land, however, remained confident in God’s ability to grant them victory over its inhabitants. These two men are identified in the commentary as the Biblical Joshua (Yashū‘ah ibn Nūn) and Caleb (Kālib ibn Yūfannah), who tried to calm the fears of the Israelites and instill confidence in their ability to overcome the land’s inhabitants with the help of God (R, Ṭ, Th, Z). This description accords with the Biblical account, although a minor report indicates that the two men represent two of the lands’ inhabitants who had been converted to belief in Moses’ prophethood and had returned with the advance Israelite party (R, Ṭ).

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24 They said, “O Moses! We shall never enter it, so long as they remain therein. So go forth, thou and thy Lord, and fight! We shall sit here.”

24 So go forth, thou and thy Lord is understood to mean “go forth, Moses, with the help of thy Lord,” since God cannot be said to “go forth” in a physical sense (Ṭ). There are reports that the Prophet’s Companions understood this account in vv. 21–26 as a warning to them to follow the Prophet’s command, even to go into battle against a powerful enemy, rather than exhibiting the cowardice and lack of faith demonstrated by the Israelites in this story. According to one report, at Ḥudaybiyah, when the Prophet and his Companions were barred from entering Makkah to perform the pilgrimage and were engaged in a potentially dangerous confrontation with the more powerful Makkans in 6/628, the Companion Miqdād ibn al-Aswad cited the present Quranic verse and said, “By God, we will not be like the Israelite party, when they said to their prophet, So go forth, thou and thy Lord, and fight! We shall sit here; but rather [we shall say]: ‘Go forth, thou and thy Lord, and fight! Verily we shall be fighting along with you’” (Ṭ). A variation of this account connects it to the Battle of Badr in 2/624 (IK).

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25 He said, “My Lord! I have no power over anyone save
myself and my brother; so separate us from the iniquitous people!"

26 He said, “Then verily it shall be forbidden them for forty years, while they shall wander on the earth. So grieve not for the iniquitous people.”

25–26 In his frustration with the Israelites’ refusal to follow his command, Moses complained to God that he had no control over, and by extension no moral accountability for, any save himself and his brother, Aaron. Although Joshua and Caleb were faithful to his command (see 5:23 and commentary), al-Zamakhsharī suggests that Moses does not include them among those over whom he has “power” because, in his despair with the Israelites, he cannot be sure of the loyalty of any of them, save his brother, a fellow prophet. Alternately, al-Zamakhsharī suggests that Moses may here be using brother in a religious sense to mean all those who faithfully follow him in his religion, rather than just his biological brother, Aaron. Moses’ supplication to God, separate us from the iniquitous, is understood to be a plea to God to judge or decide between Moses and his brother, on the one hand, and his “iniquitous” followers on the other (Ṭ, Z).

The Divine response to Moses’ plea for judgment comes in v. 26: Then verily it (meaning the land) shall be forbidden them for forty years, while they shall wander on the earth. That the land was forbidden them may be understood to mean that they were physically prevented from entering it or that they were to observe the prohibition as a matter of devotion and submission to God (R). The subsequent command to grieve not for the iniquitous clearly connects this Divine statement to Moses’ supplication against the “iniquitous” in v. 25. The command to grieve not is said to have been addressed to Moses, who was dismayed by the severity of the punishment meted out to his people as a result of his supplication and regretted having made it (R). Although the Israelites were forbidden from the land for forty years, God’s “ordainment” of the land for them remained, being inscribed in the Preserved Tablet according to some commentators (see 5:21c), but in suspension (Z).

The beginning of v. 26 may also be read, “Then verily it shall be forbidden them. For forty years they shall wander on the earth,” indicating that the exile was “permanent” for the disobedient among the Israelites, since they would most likely die before they were able to enter it (Ṭ). Later Jericho was conquered under the leadership of Joshua, whom the commentators consider to be a prophet sent to guide the Israelites after Moses’ death (Q, Ṭ, Z), although some reports claim that Moses entered Jericho along with Joshua (R, Ṭ, Z) and personally killed one of the
giants—or a domineering people (jabbārin) mentioned in v. 22—among its inhabitants (Ṭ). The commentators, like the Biblical account, state that none of the other Israelites who were adults at that time, save the obedient Joshua and Caleb, survived to enter the land that God had ordained for them (Ṭ, Z, Numbers 14).

Because the Divinely imposed exile and wandering are presented as a punishment for the “iniquitous” and disobedient Israelites, and because Moses had asked that he and his brother be “separated from them,” some questioned whether Moses and Aaron remained with the Israelites during their period of wandering. Most claim that they did, and some assert that the exile was not difficult for them and caused them no hardship, just as the fire into which Abraham was thrown remained cool for him (21:69; R, Z). God is also said to have continued to grant comfort and sustenance even to the Israelites themselves during their exile (Ṭ, Z), including providing them water from the twelve springs that miraculously flowed from a rock when Moses struck it with his staff (see 2:60; 7:160; Ẓ).

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**27** And recite unto them, with truth, the account of Adam’s two sons, when they each offered a sacrifice, and it was accepted from one of them, though not accepted from the other. One said, “I will surely slay you!” [The other] said, “God accepts only from the reverent.

27–32 Cf. Genesis 4. These verses recount the story of the Biblical Cain and Abel, and like its Biblical version the Quranic story of Cain and Abel serves as a prototype of the inclination of fallen human beings toward violence and the killing of their own “brothers.” Within its specifically Quranic context, the story is read by some commentators as offering a subtle commentary on issues related particularly to the People of the Book raised elsewhere in the sūrah.

Recite unto them, with truth may mean that Muhammad should relate this account to the Jews and/or the idolaters who, according to the interpretation of v. 11, had plotted to kill Muhammad and some of his Companions (Z): Remember God’s Blessing upon you, when a people were prepared to stretch forth their hands against you, but He withheld their hands from you (see 5:11c). The idiomatic phrase stretch forth their hands against is also used to describe the intent to kill in the present account (v. 28), suggesting a thematic link between the two passages. Insofar as the story is about the moral danger of spiritual envy, it may be directed at those Jews and Christians who were hostile to Muhammad’s message out of spiritual envy (R; spiritual envy in general, on the part of earlier
religious communities, is suggested in v. 59 and stated directly in 2:90, 109, 213; 3:19; 4:54; 45:17).

The conclusion of this account with a reminder about the gravity of the sin of murder as it is found in God’s message to the Israelites (v. 32) further suggests that this account may have been directed, in part, toward the People of the Book. Al-Ṭabarī, however, suggests that the reason for telling this story was to encourage the Muslims to deal leniently and forgivingly with those Jews who had been plotting to kill Muhammad and some of his followers, and hence to follow the example of Abel, who did not raise his hand against his brother despite his brother’s threat to kill him. He cites a hadīth, “Verily God gives you the example of the two sons of Adam; so take [the path of] the better of the two, and leave [the path of] the worse” (Ṭ).

27 Adam’s two sons refers to the Biblical Cain (Qābīl) and Abel (Hābīl). The two were either commanded by God to offer a sacrifice (Ṭ) or, according to some commentators, engaged in rival sacrifices in order to compete for the right to marry Cain’s twin sister, whom both Cain and Abel desired (R, Ṭ, Z). Abel, being a herdsman, offered a fattened sheep for the sacrifice, while Cain, who grew crops, offered some of his produce. The Quranic account indicates that God accepted the sacrifice of the one (understood to be Abel) and not the other (understood to be Cain), but, like the Biblical account, does not indicate the reason for this choice. Some commentators explain that while Abel sacrificed his most prized sheep, Cain offered the poorest produce from his crop (Ṭ). Sacrifice here renders qurbān, a word whose root, q-r-b, is related primarily to nearness, indicating that “sacrifice” is understood primarily as a means of drawing closer to God. Al-Ṭabarī notes that closeness to God was the essential motivation of both Cain and Abel in their sacrifice, thus casting doubt on the accounts that indicate that their sacrifices were part of a competition over a woman, although al-Rāzī attributes pious intent in the sacrifice only to Abel. God accepts only from the reverent, Abel’s statement in response to his brother’s threat, is meant to indicate that the latter’s sacrifice was not accepted because it had not been done with proper “reverence” or fear of God (Ṭ, Z), as he had offered only a lowly and unfitting sacrifice (Ṭ).

Al-Ṭabarī notes that the practice of sacrificial offering for earlier religious communities was like the practices of charity and alms for Muslims and, more broadly, that righteous acts, including prayer and fasting as well as mandatory charity, take the place of sacrifice in Islam. Offered a sacrifice translates garraba, a verb that can also be used in connection with giving charity (R, Z). Insofar as prayer, fasting, and charity are analogous to ritual sacrifice in the Islamic perspective, God accepts only from the reverent serves as a general reminder that only ritual or moral acts done with “reverence” are accepted by God (R, Z). However, in Islam, the rites of the ḥajj culminate with the sacrificial slaughter of animals and the Muslim Feast of Sacrifice (ʿĪd al-aḍḥā, sometimes also called ʿĪd
al-qurbān), both of which commemorate God’s halting Abraham’s test, during which he was to sacrifice his son, and His provision of a ram for the sacrifice instead. The meat from the sacrificial slaughtering at the end of the pilgrimage rite is given to charity, which would seem to confirm partially al-Ṭabarī’s assertion that, in Islam, charity toward the poor partly takes the place of ritual sacrifice found in earlier religions. See 22:36–37, where it says of the sacrificial camels to be slaughtered during the pilgrimage: *Neither their flesh nor their blood will reach God, but the reverence from you reaches Him.***

Even if you stretch forth your hand against me to slay me, I shall not stretch forth my hand against you to slay you. Truly I fear God, Lord of the worlds.

Commentators question why Abel refused to oppose his brother’s attack or defend himself, even though Cain had clearly stated his intention to kill him. Some argue that this was a way of clarifying and emphasizing the enormity of his brother’s murderous intention and action (R, Ṭ), while others claim that attacking another in self-defense had not been made legitimate at this early stage of human history (Ṭ, Z). Others point out that Abel’s statement, *I shall not stretch forth my hand against you to slay you,* is not necessarily an abandonment of self-defense, but an abandonment of the intention to kill his brother preemptively or in the process of self-defense (Q, R). Some accounts indicate that Cain killed Abel while he was sleeping, and Abel was thus unable to defend himself, which does not preclude the possibility that Abel would have defended himself, had he been awake (Q, R). It may also be the case that Abel considered it better to be killed than to kill, even in self-defense (R). Al-Qurṭūbī notes that the pious and prominent early Muslims who, like ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿUmar, abstained from fighting fellow Muslims and taking sides in the First Civil War (36–40/656–61) cited, by way of justification, the example of Abel, who demonstrated greater strength in abstaining from violence that could have resulted in the death of his brother—a fellow monotheist, even if, at that moment, a disobedient and iniquitous one.***

I desire that you should be burdened with my sin and your sin and so become one of the inhabitants of the Fire.
Such is the recompense of the wrongdoers.”

29  *I desire that you should be burdened with my sin and your sin* is understood to mean that, rather than attacking his brother in return, Abel preferred to allow his brother to assume the full burden of the sin. *My sin (ithmī)* here is not intended to mean that Cain would bear the burden of Abel’s sins—for the Quran and Islamic tradition are clear that none bears the moral burden of another—but rather that Cain would bear the burden of the sin of killing Abel. Thus *my sin* really means “the sin of killing me” (*ithm qatlī*)—the intervening *qatl* (“killing”) is elided (*R, Ṭ, Z*)—whereas *your sin*—that is, Cain’s sin—refers to the other acts of disobedience he had committed up to that time.

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30  Then his soul prompted him to slay his brother, and he slew him, and thus came to be among the losers.

30  Cain’s carnal soul *prompted him to slay his brother*, meaning that it led or encouraged him to kill him, that it made it easy for him, or that it made it seem good to him and emboldened him to undertake the crime (*Aj, R, Ṭ, Z*). Although *soul* may simply refer to the individual as an independent moral entity, in certain verses in the Quran and in pious and Sufi literature the “soul” can represent the seat of the passions that drive human beings to behave in immoral ways; see 12:53, where the prophet Joseph says, *But I absolve not my own soul. Surely the soul commands to evil.* In connection with this verse, al-Qushayrī remarks that once the soul— influenced as it is by its vain desires—has formulated an intention to do evil (as Cain had in v. 27), subsequent calls to right or just action become muted, perhaps explaining why Abel’s response to his brother’s threat had no apparent effect. According to most reports, Cain killed his brother in his sleep by crushing his head between two rocks, an idea some say he received from Satan (*R, Ṭ, Z*). Although Adam lived many years after Abel’s murder, it is said that he never laughed again (*R, Z*).

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31  Then God sent a crow, scratching the earth, to show him how he might conceal his brother’s nakedness. He said, “Oh, woe unto me! Am I not able to be even as this crow
and conceal my brother’s nakedness?” And he came to be among the remorseful.

31 Some commentators indicate that Abel was the first person to have been killed, or even to have died, among human beings; hence Cain’s ignorance of how to dispose of his body (Ṭ, Z). Cain does not know how to conceal Abel’s nakedness and protect it from wild beasts, since the practice of burying the dead had not yet been established (Ṭ). God then sent a living crow who “scratched the earth” with its beak and feet to bury another crow, thereby demonstrating to Cain how to properly bury his brother’s corpse (Ṭ), indicating that the rite of burial was taught to human beings by God. Seeing the crow able to dispose of the other crow’s body causes Cain to realize his terrible moral state as well as his ignorance, as he had not had the decency or knowledge to do this for his own brother and so became remorseful. Other accounts say that the crow was digging in the earth in order to bury some other thing and this gave Cain the idea of burying his brother; or that the crow came and began covering the dead Abel with earth, and when Cain saw how much dignity was afforded his victim, he became remorseful (R). Nakedness translates saw’ah, which can also be used to allude to one’s private parts. Al-Zamakhsharī asserts that saw’ah here denotes the shame of Abel’s exposed body, whereas al-Ṭabarī simply glosses saw’ah as “corpse.” Oh, woe unto me translates waylatī, which is an exclamation of spiritual regret found elsewhere in the Quran (see 2:79c), often when the certainty of Divine punishment is realized; see 18:49; 21:14, 47, 97; 25:28; 36:52; 37:20; 68:31.

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32 For this reason, We prescribed for the Children of Israel that whosoever slays a soul—unless it be for another soul or working corruption upon the earth—it is as though he slew mankind altogether, and whosoever saves the life of one, it is as though he saved the life of mankind altogether. Our messengers have certainly come unto them with clear proofs. Yet even after that, many of them are prodigal on the earth.

32 The account of Adam’s two sons here and in the Bible is focused on the gravity and horror of the act of murder. Cain’s initial inability to hide Abel’s
corpse in the Quranic account and the statement that Abel’s blood was “crying . . . out from the ground” in the Biblical account (Genesis 4:10) both suggest the particular difficulty of concealing a crime of murder, and thus the likelihood of punishment in this world as well as the next. In this verse concluding the account, the Quran further emphasizes the enormity of the sin of murder by stating that God prescribed for the Children of Israel that the killing of one soul was like the killing of mankind altogether and, analogously, that saving a life was like saving mankind altogether. The Jewish commentary tradition as contained in both the Mishnah and the Talmud similarly connects this specific idea, which became an important part of Jewish ethics, to the story of Cain and Abel.

In explaining the symbolic equivalence the verse suggests between killing a single soul and killing all humanity, some commentators claim that the intended meaning is that killing a soul of particular spiritual importance—such as a prophet or a “just imam”—is like killing all humanity; others say that killing a single soul is like killing all humanity from the point of view of the murdered individual (Q, Ṭ). Some, however, consider the gravity of murder from the perspective of its offense to the Creator, for whether one kills a single person or many, one has violated what God has made most sacred (Q).

Mujāhid asserts that the punishment in the Hereafter is equally grave for all murderers, regardless of the number of their victims, since the terrible punishment threatened for killing a believer is not increased even in the case of multiple victims (Q, Ṭ); although others take this statement to mean that the worldly punishment for murder is the same for one or multiple victims (Q, Ṭ), since the perpetrator has only one life that can be taken. The exception unless it be for another soul exempts killing in the course of carrying out lawful capital punishment against one who has killed another soul—or for any other crime that carries the penalty of capital punishment, such as adultery committed by married persons (R)—as well as killing those who are working corruption, understood to mean idolatry, warring against the Muslims, or terrorizing roads (Q, Ṭ, Z). For working corruption, and its penal consequences, see v. 33.

Whosoever saves the life of one is understood variously as referring to those who, as the kin of the murder victim, forgo retaliation and agree to accept compensation or simply forgive the perpetrator (see 2:178 and commentary) or to those who save people from fatal peril, such as fire or drowning (Ṭ, Z). Some broaden the idea of saving a life to include more indirect or spiritual modes of saving, such as by lifting a person out of poverty or providing guidance if one is spiritually or morally astray (Qm).

The verse indicates that the moral principle equating the value of a single life to that of all humanity in matters of killing and saving was ordained explicitly for the Children of Israel. Some commentators explain that the latter are mentioned specifically, as they were the first religious community threatened with eternal
punishment for the sin of murder (Q); al-Rāzī argues that the Children of Israel are singled out here because of the alleged plot of certain Jews of Madinah against the Prophet, as mentioned in 5:11c. Other commentators indicate that the moral principle applies equally to the Muslim community (IK, Q, Ṣ).

Verily the recompense of those who wage war against God and His Messenger, and endeavor to work corruption upon the earth is that they be killed or crucified, or have their hands and feet cut off from opposite sides, or be banished from the land. That is their disgrace in this world, and in the Hereafter theirs shall be a great punishment,

This verse contains one of the five Quranic ḥadd punishments—that is, Divinely ordained capital or corporal punishments—to be carried out by the Islamic state against those convicted of crimes considered to undermine the moral fabric of the Islamic community as a whole, including murderers, thieves, adulterers, slanderers, and, here, those who wage war against God and His Messenger (muḥāribūn). This phrase is understood to mean those who attack and terrorize members of the Islamic community directly, since one cannot “wage war” against God (Q). The crimes covered under this ḥadd punishment are referred to collectively as ḥirābah and consist of armed robbery, assault (including rape), and murder, particularly of innocent travelers along the road, although this is widely considered to include attacks in cities and settled areas as well. The use of weapons, threats of extreme violence, or other tactics to instill fear are the hallmark of these crimes and distinguish them from other forms of robbery or assault.

Although the phrase work corruption upon the earth may seem to be open to wide interpretation, its meaning in this verse has been limited by most major commentators to the armed crimes mentioned above and their detrimental effect on the safety and security of the community. Nonetheless, the idea of “working corruption upon the earth” is mentioned in several other places, where it is often connected with “behaving wickedly upon the earth” and opposed to “setting things aright upon it.” It is sometimes used to indicate spiritual corruption and its otherworldly consequences; see 2:11–12, 27, 220; 3:63; 7:56, 142; 10:40, 81; 16:88. In 2:30, however, the angels foresee that establishing human beings as “vicegerents” on earth will mean their “working corruption” and “shedding blood,” thus linking “working corruption” to physical violence and suggesting that it is a
fundamental tendency within the human character (cf. 30:41), an idea borne out by the story of Cain and Abel in vv. 27–31. “Working corruption” is implicitly or explicitly connected to physical violence elsewhere (see, e.g., 2:205; 5:64; 26:183; 27:48–49; 28:4) and often implies a combination of spiritual and worldly corruption; see 7:74, 85–86, 103; 11:85; 13:25.

The most widely attested occasion for the revelation of this verse is an incident in which a group of men from the ʿUraynah and ʿUkl tribes came to the Prophet feigning a desire to embrace Islam. The Prophet accepted them into the community, but they soon complained to him that, as Bedouin, they found the settled life of Madinah unbearable. The Prophet thus allowed them to leave the city and sent with them a camelherd and some camels to milk for sustenance. Once outside the city, however, they brutally maimed and killed the camelherd and made off with the camels the Prophet had given them to use. The Prophet had the men apprehended and reportedly ordered that their hands and feet be cut off, their eyes gouged out, and their bodies exposed until death (Q, Ṭ, W). This verse then came down, establishing the punishment for such crimes as being the four penalties listed here: the cutting off of a hand and foot on opposite sides, execution, crucifixion, and banishment (cf. 20:71, where Pharaoh threatens his sorcerers with similar punishments when they repent and become followers of Moses).

Given that the perpetrators were also, among other things, apostates (murtaddūn), since they embraced Islam in the presence of the Prophet, then renounced it through their actions, a small minority have considered the verse to apply to apostates in general (Ṭ). It seems clear, however, that the severe punishments in this verse pertain specifically to those who commit various crimes brazenly and with exceptional brutality, violence, and terrorization of innocent people.

Some say that this verse, with its list of punishments for such criminals, was sent as a clarification in light of the Prophet’s actions or even an endorsement of them (Ṭ). Others understand it as a partial criticism and abrogation of the severity of the Prophet’s response, since the verse contains no endorsement of the practice of gouging out eyes or exposure until death (Q, Ṭ). According to some, the verse can be read as implicitly banning torture (Q); and in fact the Prophet had refrained from any kind of torture both before and after this incident (Q). Others reject the assertion that the verse abrogated or criticized the Prophet’s behavior, claiming either that the Prophet had wanted to gouge out the eyes of the perpetrators, but when the verse was revealed he refrained from doing so, or that the Prophet’s additional order to gouge out their eyes was done as retribution (qiṣāṣ, see 2:178 and commentary) for the similar maiming the perpetrators had inflicted on the camelherd (Q, Ṭ).

Some commentators and a minority of legal authorities argued that the Islamic authority (or imām) could use his discretion to apply one or a combination of the
four punishments listed here for one convicted of ḥirābah (Q, Ṭ). Al-Shāfiʿī and others legal scholars, however, considered the punishments to correlate in specific ways to the severity of the crime: those who committed murder in the course of ḥirābah, but not theft, were subject to simple execution; those who committed theft, but not murder, had their hand and foot amputated; those who committed both theft and murder were killed and crucified; and those who terrorized others, but did not kill or steal in the process, were banished (JJ, Q, Ṭ, Ṭs).

There has been some debate among jurists about the specific procedures for carrying out these punishments. Crucifixion, understood to mean the exposure of the criminal in public, was usually carried out, historically, after the execution of a criminal in Islamic society—as a means of public deterrence—not as a means of execution itself. Some legal scholars recommended crucifixion prior to execution, but not as the means to it, so that perpetrators would be exposed, but then almost immediately killed, lest they endure suffering that would constitute torture, which is forbidden (Q, Ṭs). Banishment is interpreted by some early commentators as meaning that perpetrators should be pursued relentlessly until driven from Islamic lands. Most, however, understood it to mean that they should be exiled from their native territory to another or that they should be imprisoned, which effectively “banished” them from human society (Q, Ṭ, Ṭs). Imprisonment was reportedly first implemented as a punishment by the second Caliph, ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who would imprison such offenders until they had fully repented (Q). The idea that the worldly disgrace and punishment of sin will be compounded by punishment in the Hereafter is articulated in other forms elsewhere; see v. 41; 2:114; 9:74; 13:33–34.

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34 save those who repent before you overpower them. And know that God is Forgiving, Merciful.

34 Here, as in the case of all sins, even grave ones, the door of repentance is left open. Repentance for these crimes may spare the perpetrators punishment in the Hereafter, but is considered to spare the perpetrators earthly punishment only if they repent before they are “overpowered,” that is, before they are caught and brought to the authorities. This parallels the idea that repentance spares a person punishment in the next life only if it is made before death, after which the Divine sentence and punishment become certain (see 4:17–18c). In most schools of law, once the perpetrator of a major crime has been brought before the authorities and convicted, applying the prescribed ḥadd punishment is mandatory; but if a perpetrator is forgiven by the victim and not denounced to the authorities, then the
punishment need not be applied (Q, Ṭ). Although repentance averts the ḥadd punishments listed in v. 33, the rights of the victims are maintained insofar as the perpetrator is still required to pay restitution for damaged or stolen property and is liable to retribution, or qiṣāṣ (see 2:178 and commentary). As in the case of the law of retribution itself, a victim has the right to have justice exacted from the perpetrator, but to forgive the perpetrator and avoid a public denunciation is considered to be of higher spiritual merit and a way of participating in the Divine Attributes Forgiving and Merciful, invoked at the end of this verse.

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35 O you who believe! Reverence God, and seek the means to approach Him, and strive in His way, that haply you may prosper.

Seeking the means to approach God, or elsewhere “nearness” to Him, is presented in the Quran as both a lofty spiritual goal (and its reward; 17:57; 38:25, 40) and the result of obedient and virtuous acts (9:99; 34:37). In several verses, those who hold the highest spiritual rank are described as those brought nigh (56:11, 88; 83:21, 28). Following upon the previous verse allowing for the repentance of criminal wrongdoers, the means of approach to God might here allude to either the sinner’s act of repentance or the forgiveness and acceptance of sincere repentance on the part of the victim. Those who seek to achieve nearness by other means, however, such as through the intercession of false deities, are rebuked (39:3; 46:28). A well-known ḥadīth qudsī (sacred ḥadīth) describes the best means of approach to God as being the fulfillment of the mandatory religious acts, such as prayer, charity, and fasting. The ḥadīth then indicates that the pious servant of God may draw yet nearer to Him through supererogatory good works. In Sufi thought, seeking to approach God and attaining nearness to Him are the loftiest of spiritual goals and stations.

For Sufi commentators, as for others, right action and fulfilling religious duties was the primary means of approach to God, although Sufi commentators also stress cultivating spiritual virtues, such as patience, contentment, and sincerity as “means of approach” to God (Su, Qu). Ibn ʿAjībah sees the means to approach as necessarily including a spiritually accomplished shaykh, who can guide the aspirant toward removing the soul’s impurities, thereby increasing nearness to God. To strive in His way is also a common injunction throughout the Quran (see, e.g., 2:218; 4:95; 8:72, 74; 9:20; 49:15).

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36 Truly those who disbelieve, were they to possess all that is on the earth and the like of it besides with which to ransom themselves from the punishment of the Day of Resurrection, it would not be accepted from them. And theirs shall be a painful punishment.

37 They will wish to come forth from the Fire, but they shall not come forth from it. And theirs shall be a lasting punishment.

36–37 The certainty of the reckoning after death is a central theme of the Quran, and the Quran repeatedly asserts the futility of seeking to ransom oneself with worldly goods in order to escape punishment in the Hereafter. See 2:48, 123; 3:91; 10:54; 13:18; 39:47; 57:15; 70:11.

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38 As for the male thief and the female thief, cut off their hands as a recompense for what they have earned, as an exemplary punishment from God. Truly God is Mighty, Wise.

39 But whosoever repents after his wrongdoing, and makes amends, God will relent unto him. Truly God is Forgiving, Merciful.

38–39 V. 38 contains another of the five hadd punishments specifically mentioned in the Quran (see 5:33c), establishing the amputation of a hand as the punishment for theft. According to al-Qurṭubī, amputation was the punishment for theft in the pre-Islamic (jāhiliyyah) period in Arabia as well. Although some commentators argued that this penalty applied to all manner of theft, regardless of the amount or degree, most legal authorities asserted, on the basis of a Prophetic hadīth and the precedent of the early Caliphs, that the punishment applied only to those who stole a significant sum or a very precious object. The minimum amount
for which the penalty can be applied is variously given as 3 dirhams (3 grams of silver) or, most commonly, one quarter of a dīnār (1 gram of gold) or their equivalent in goods (Q, Ṭ). Others put the minimum amount at the worth of a shield (Q). For less than this, the penalty is restitution or compensation for the stolen goods, which al-Shāfiʿī considers to be mandatory even for those to whom the ḥadd punishment is also applied (Q).

The verse is explicit that the penalty applies equally to both male and female thieves, as is the case explicitly for adultery (see 24:2–3) and as is understood to be the case with all ḥadd penalties. To emphasize the point and the universality of the penalty, the Prophet famously asserted that even if his beloved daughter Fāṭimah were to be caught stealing, he would not hesitate to apply the penalty to her as well (IK).

Although the penalty is meant to be disabling, it is not intended to result in death, and Islamic Law requires that medical procedures be used to stop the bleeding and prevent death. The ḥadd punishments are understood to be a right God has against the perpetrator of crimes that, like theft, have a destabilizing effect on the society at large. Each thus serves not only as a recompense for the crime, but also as an exemplary punishment meant to deter others from such crimes and keep their overall incidence very low. To make amends here, according to al-Qurṭubī, means repenting of all disobedient actions.

As in v. 34, the door of repentance remains open, even for the worst of criminals. The commentators debated whether or not repentance spared a thief from the punishment of amputation. Some asserted that it did; others argued that it did not and that God’s “relenting” toward the repentant thief, promised in these verses, pertains only to his judgment and punishment in the Hereafter (Q, Ṭ). Several aḥādīth indicate that the Prophet assured repentant thieves who had undergone the ḥadd punishment that they were forgiven by God and had been purified of their sin as a result of the punishment (IK). Similar to the case of armed offenses (ḥirābah), discussed in vv. 33–34, foundational legal scholars, including Abū Ḥanīfah and al-Shāfiʿī, held that the ḥadd punishment could be averted only if the perpetrator were forgiven by the victim and not brought before the authorities (JJ, Z).

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Dost thou not know that unto God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth? He punishes whomsoever He will, and He forgives whomsoever He will. And God is Powerful over all things.
This verse closes the section on punishment with a reminder that God is the ultimate judge, and the true dispenser of both punishment and forgiveness. Al- Rāzī understands this verse as supporting the Ashʿarite thesis that God’s inherent right to punish some while forgiving others—even if it might seem arbitrary to the human mind—is justified on the basis of His Sovereignty and “ownership” (mulk, which means both) of all things as their Creator.

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O Messenger! Let them not grieve thee, those who hasten unto disbelief, those who say, “We believe” with their mouths, while their hearts believe not, and those who are Jews, who listen to lies and to others who have not come to thee. They distort the meaning of the word, saying, “If you are given this, then take it, but if you are not given this, then beware!” For whomsoever God desires that he be tried, thou hast no power to avail him aught against God. They are those whose hearts God desired not to purify. Theirs is disgrace in this world, and in the Hereafter they shall have a great punishment.

This verse is one of many that seek to comfort the Prophet in the face of those who reject or assail his message, here referring to both the hypocrites—those who say, “We believe” with their mouths, while their hearts believe not—and those Jews of Madinah who sought to undermine or discredit the Prophet’s mission. Some commentators indicate that hypocrites and the Jews are not necessarily grouped together here, and that while their hearts believe not, those who are Jews, who listen to lies may be read, “while their hearts believe not. Those who are Jews listen to lies” (R, Z). Who listen to lies, which was widely understood to mean listening to and accepting as truth the lies that were told, may also be read, “who listen [to the Prophet] in order to lie or deny [what he says]” (R).

The most widely reported context given for the specific issues mentioned with regard to the Jews in vv. 41–44 is the incident mentioned in 5:15c, in which the case of two Jewish adulterers from a nearby town, either Khaybar or, in some accounts, Fadak, were brought for judgment to the Prophet by the Madinan Jews or behalf of their coreligionists outside Madinah (Ṭ, Z). When the Prophet asked about the Torah ruling on the matter, he was reportedly given distorted information, as the
Jews sought to conceal the Torah’s prescribed penalty of stoning and avert this punishment from the two adulterers (W). That these Jews listen to lies is understood to mean that they listen to their own rabbis’ misrepresentation of the Torah teachings. That they listen to others who have not come to thee refers to their consulting with the Jews outside Madinah, in Khaybar (or Fadak), who instructed the Madinan Jews: if you are given this—that is, if the Prophet ordains flogging for the adulterers—then take it, but if you are not given this, and they are given the penalty of stoning, then beware! (Ṭ, W, Z). A minority report says that this verse and vv. 41–47 in general refer to a dispute brought to the Prophet by two Madinan Jewish clans, the Banū Naḍīr and Banū Qurayẓah, about whether compensation (dīyah) can be accepted rather than execution for the slaying of one who is of a lower tribal standing than the murderer (Q, Ṭ).

Distort the meaning of the word (yuḥarrifūna’l-kalima min baʿdi mawādiʿihi) can mean, literally, to move words from their proper place in the text, and some suggest that the Madinan Jewish leaders removed the stoning passage from its context in the Torah’s discussion of adultery (JJ). This “distortion” (taḥrīf) of the scriptural text on the part of the Jews is similarly described in 2:75; 4:46; 5:13. Multiple accounts say that when the Jews requested a ruling from the Prophet on the two Jewish adulterers, and he demanded to know the ruling in the Torah, they took him to a young rabbi named Ibn Ṣūriyā, who confirmed the Torah penalty of stoning. He or another Jewish authority apprised the Prophet that the Jewish leaders had decided to change the prescribed penalty of stoning when they became reluctant to carry it out against those of high social standing and so substituted the alternate penalty of flogging and public humiliation, which they were more comfortable imposing upon all adulterers (Ṭ, Z). The Prophet thereafter decided to impose the penalty of stoning on the adulterers, asserting that this practice was a revival of the original teaching of the Torah (Ṭ).

That he be tried (fitnatahu) can refer to either trial or temptation. In the negative context in which it is found, however, some major commentators understand this verse to mean that when God desires that some be in error, no one, not even the Prophet, has the power to change their spiritual situation against God’s Will (R, Ṭ). Thus there is no reason for the Prophet to be saddened by their rejection of him. For similar reassurances to the Prophet about those who rejected the Quranic message, see v. 68; 3:176; 6:33; 10:65; 16:127; 31:23; 36:76. Such people are those whose hearts God desired not to purify. For al-Rāzī, this means that God refuses to aid them spiritually as a consequence of their evil actions or that He refuses to purify them of the negative passions and emotions that lead them to disbelief. For the pairing of disgrace in this world and punishment in the Hereafter, see 5:33 and commentary.

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42 Those who listen to lies, and consume what is unlawful—if they come to thee, then judge between them, or turn away from them. If thou turnest away from them, they will not harm thee in the least. But if thou judgest, judge between them with justice. Truly God loves the just.

This verse continues the discussion of the Madinah Jews who attempted to deceive the Prophet when they came to him for judgment. That they consume what is unlawful refers not to food, but to illegal financial gain (JJ), most specifically bribery (Ṭ), and is mentioned in connection with the Jews of the Prophet’s time in vv. 62–63 as well. If they come to thee, then judge between them, or turn away from them gives the Prophet the option of adjudicating a matter among the People of the Book that is brought to him or refusing to do so. Islamic legal scholars considered this incident and this verse as bearing upon the Islamic authorities’ right to adjudicate at least some crimes and disputes among the non-Muslims within the Islamic state when no Muslim is involved in the matter. Both al-Shāfiʿī and Mālik held that if a serious matter between two non-Muslims is brought to the Islamic ruler (imām), he may choose to adjudicate their case or abstain from it (Q); if the Islamic ruler declined to rule on the case, it would be adjudicated within the non-Muslims’ own religious community. Some say that this choice to adjudicate such cases or abstain from doing so was abrogated by v. 48, which instructs the Prophet to judge between them in accordance with what God has sent down, although others disagree (Q, Ṭ). Al-Shāfiʿī, Mālik, and other legal scholars considered it the duty of the Islamic ruler to adjudicate all serious disputes among non-Muslims that also involve a Muslim. Once the matter is brought to the Islamic ruler, however, the matter is to be adjudicated according to Islamic Law (Q, Ṭ; cf. 5:48–49 and commentary). For the importance of judging with justice, see 4:58, 135 and commentary. See also 4:65, where the unwillingness of certain Madinan hypocrites to accept the Prophet’s judgments in their disputes is a sign of their lack of belief. God loves the just is repeated in 60:8.

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43 And how is it that they come to thee for judgment, when they have the Torah, wherein is God’s Judgment? Yet even after that, they turn their backs, and they are not believers.
Truly We sent down the Torah, wherein is a guidance and a light, by which the prophets who submitted [unto God] judged those who are Jews, as did the sages and the rabbis, in accordance with such of God’s Book as they were bidden to preserve and to which they were witnesses. So fear not mankind, but fear Me! And sell not My signs for a paltry price. Whosoever judges not by that which God has sent down—it is they who are disbelievers.

43–44 The opening question in v. 43 suggests the disingenuousness of the Madinan Jews in seeking the Prophet’s judgment on a matter already clearly decreed in their own scriptures, and that they were merely seeking a more lenient ruling than the one they had been given (Ṭ). This verse, then, along with vv. 44–47, indicates that the Torah and the Gospel remain valid sources of moral and legal judgment and guidance for Jews and Christians, respectively, even after the coming of the Prophet—indeed, even in his presence. See also v. 68, where the People of the Book are likewise enjoined to observe their scriptures. The Torah is described here as containing a guidance and a light, as it is in 6:91. The prophets who submitted [unto God] is thought, by some, to refer to the Prophet Muhammad, because of the connection to the notion of “submission” (islām; Ṭ), but it more likely refers to those Israelite prophets who lived between Moses and Jesus (Z). Sages translates rabbāniyyūn, which is defined in several different ways by early Islamic commentators: as the legal (or political) authorities among the Jews (Ṭ); as the ascetic devotees (zuḥhād) among the descendants of Aaron, and so perhaps “priests” (Z); or as the most authoritative scholars among the Jews, those comparable to Islamic jurisprudents (mujtahidūn) insofar as they were qualified to issue decisive rulings on religious Law (R). Rabbis translates aḥbār, which was usually glossed simply as the religious scholars (‘ulamā’) among the Jews. The warning fear not mankind, but fear Me is also found in v. 3; 2:150; 3:175.

The warning against “selling” weighty religious matters—such as Divine revelations and covenants—for a paltry price is a common metaphorical warning and chastisement in the Quran, meant to suggest the absurdity of such an exchange and the inevitable loss one incurs in trading something of eternal value—Divine guidance and salvation—for the ephemeral things of this world (cf. 2:41, 79, 174; 3:77, 187, 199; 9:9; 16:95). Together these two commands enjoin the Jewish authorities and scholars to preserve the Torah as it had been revealed and to avoid altering it, either out of fear of others or to gain wealth and social standing by changing the laws to suit influential people (cf. the warning against unlawful
consumption, meaning “bribery” in v. 42).

Those who do not judge according to that which God has sent down—here invoking the case of the Jews neglecting the judgment on adulterers found in the Torah—are disbelievers, kāfirūn. Kāfirūn also has the meaning of those who “cover” or “hide” something and may thus refer to those who, like the Jews in this incident, try to conceal the words or rulings found in scripture (Ṭ), rather than to those in an absolute state of disbelief. The warning to those who do not judge by that which God has sent down is repeated in vv. 45 and 47, where such people are described as wrongdoers and iniquitous, respectively. An interpretation attributed to the early commentator Ibn ʿAbbās asserts that those who actively oppose or reject the Judgment of God are disbelievers, while those who simply fail to judge according to Divine Law are wrongdoers (v. 45) and iniquitous (v. 47; Z). The Quran states elsewhere that judgment is ultimately the prerogative of God alone (6:57, 62; 12:40, 67).

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45 And therein We prescribed for them: a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, and for wounds, retribution. But whosoever forgoes it out of charity, it shall be an expiation for him. Whosoever judges not by that which God has sent down—it is they who are wrongdoers.

45 This verse provides a general description of the law of retribution found in the Torah (see Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21), although forgoing the retribution out of charity is not mentioned in these Biblical passages. Al-Rāzī indicates that this verse was meant to remind the Jews of the law of the Torah regarding retribution for murder and injury. Indeed, some commentators suggest that vv. 41–44 refer not only to the Jews altering the penalty for adultery, but also to their neglect of the proper retribution and penalty for killing. The Madinan Jewish clans, the Banū Naḍīr and Banū Qurayḥah, would reportedly alter the required retribution in accordance with the relative social standing of the killer and the victim. As the Banū Naḍīr were of a higher social standing than the Banū Qurayḥah, if a member of the Banū Naḍīr killed one of the Banū Qurayḥah, he would not face retribution, but merely be required to pay compensation; in the reverse situation, however, the perpetrator would be killed or required to pay a much higher amount of compensation (R, Ṭ). The present verse is meant to indicate
that the true Torah ruling regarding retribution, a life for a life, makes no accommodation based on the social status of killer or killed and makes no provision for the payment of compensation (diyāh)—an alternative allowed in Islamic Law. According to this verse, the laws of the Torah allow only equivalent retribution or outright forgiveness (Q, R).

Although the commentators understand this to be a description of the law of retribution as given specifically to Moses, similar principles exist for Muslims (cf. 2:178; 2:178c; 4:92; 42:40). Forgoing lawful retribution as an act of charity is said in the present verse to be an expiation for sin, but the commentators have differed over whether this act expiated the sins of the forgiving party as a reward for his charity or whether it served to expiate the sin of the offender (T, Z). Al-Ṭabarī argues that the expiation is for the forgiving party, since another hadīth clearly indicates that expiation for the offender comes through the carrying out of the hadd penalty for the crime; and he cites a hadīth that states that forgoing one’s right to retribution as an act of charity serves as an expiation of one’s own sins. A reward from God for the forgiving party seems indicated in 42:40, suggesting either that the expiation is for the forgiver or, alternately, that the expiation is for the offender and a separate “reward” from God lies in store for the forgiver (R).

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And in their footsteps, We sent Jesus son of Mary, confirming the Torah that had come before him, and We gave him the Gospel, wherein is a guidance and a light, confirming the Torah that had come before him, as a guidance and an exhortation to the reverent.

46 In their footsteps means in the footsteps of the prophets who submitted, mentioned in v. 44 (R, Z). In the present verse both Jesus and the Gospel he brings are separately described as confirming the Torah. Jesus is also described as confirming the Torah in 3:50 and 61:6, as is John the Baptist in 3:39. That Jesus “confirms the Torah” means that he upholds the validity of all Torah rulings not specifically abrogated by the Gospel (T); see also 3:50, where Jesus comes to make lawful unto the Israelites part of that which was forbidden to them. The Gospel here, like the Torah in v. 44, is described as containing a guidance and a light. The Quran is also described as a light in v. 15; 7:157; 64:8.

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Let the people of the Gospel judge by what God has sent down therein. Whosoever judges not by that which God has sent down—it is they who are iniquitous.

Several commentators note that enjoining the people of the Gospel to judge by what God has sent down therein means that they should follow the rulings of the Torah in most cases, since Jesus himself lived largely according to Torah rulings, with the exception of those that the Gospel abrogates (IK), and since the Gospel itself contains teachings and exhortations, but relatively few legal rulings (Z). This verse indicates that the Gospel remains a valid source of guidance for the people of the Gospel, just as vv. 43–44 suggest that the Jews can continue to find guidance in the Torah. The continuing validity of these two scriptures is also suggested in v. 68: O People of the Book! You stand on naught till you observe the Torah and the Gospel, and that which has been sent down unto you from your Lord. Several commentators, however, argue that the exhortation here to follow the Gospel indicates only that they should have followed the Gospel prior to the coming of the Quran, which thereafter abrogated the scripture that came before it (IK, R). This reading seems implausible in light of other Quranic verses, however, since v. 43 questions why the Jews have come to the Prophet for judgment (regarding two Jewish adulterers) when they have the Torah, indicating that Prophetic adjudication is not necessary (even during his lifetime) as long as they follow their own scripture. And indeed, in issuing his ruling in that case—namely, the implementation of the penalty of stoning, the Prophet stated that his actions were intended to revive (and thus legitimate) the Torah ruling for the Jews (see commentary on 5:41–44).

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And We have sent down unto thee the Book in truth, confirming the Book that came before it, and as a protector over it. So judge between them in accordance with what God has sent down, and follow not their caprices away from the truth that has come unto thee. For each among you We have appointed a law and a way. And had God willed, He would have made you one community, but [He willed otherwise], that He might try you in that which He has
given you. So vie with one another in good deeds. Unto God shall be your return all together, and He will inform you of that wherein you differ.

48 This verse addresses the Prophet directly and describes the Book sent down to him—that is, the Quran—as confirming the Book that came before it, just as the Gospel confirms the Torah. The Quran is also described as “confirming” earlier scriptures in 2:41, 89, 91, 97, 101; 3:3, 81; 6:92; 35:31; 46:30. The Quran is further described as a protector (muhaymin) over the previous scriptures, meaning that the Quran testifies to the validity of the earlier scriptures and serves as their trustee, keeper, and guardian (Ṭ, Z). “Protector” (al-Muhaymin) is also one of the Names of God in the Quran (59:23). The idea of the Quran as guardian and keeper of previous revelations is consistent with 5:41c and 5:45c, which report that the Prophet ordered the sentence of stoning for the two idolaters as well as retribution for killing and injury in order to reestablish the original Torah rulings on these matters. When the Prophet “judges between them”—that is, the People of the Book—this verse enjoins him to do so in accordance with what God has sent down, which most major commentators understand to mean that he should judge according to what God has revealed to him, namely, the Quran (Bḍ, Ṭ, Z). Alternately, it could mean that he should judge the People of the Book according to what God has sent down to them, namely, their own scriptures (which is what the Prophet explicitly does in the incident discussed in vv. 41–43). That he should follow not their caprices means that he should not rule in accordance with their unwarranted digressions from or alterations to their own law, as discussed in vv. 41–47 (Ṭ), or that he should not comply with their desire to alter or neglect what has come to the Prophet himself in the Quran (Bḍ). The Prophet is similarly warned against following the caprices of the People of the Book in the following verse, as well as in 2:120, 145; 42:15.

Although vv. 41–47, taken together, suggest the validity of Jews and Christians judging by their own scriptures, and thus the continuing spiritual guidance to be found in those scriptures, this verse goes farther by asserting the providential nature of different religious communities and their distinct laws and practices. Indeed, the verse does not pertain only to Jews and Christians, but rather makes a universal statement about all religions. For each among you We have appointed a law and a way indicates that different religious communities may have different ritual and legal formulations specifically “appointed” for them by God, and that each religious community is independent of the laws of other such communities, even if the essential truths and principles of the religions are the same (IK, Q, R, Ṭ).

Law here translates shirʿah, from the same root as sharīʿah, the technical term for religious law, and Islamic Law in particular; way (minhāj) denotes a path that
is smooth and clear (Ṭ, Z). For some commentators, these different “laws” and “ways” are not valid simultaneously; rather, God ordains a particular “law” and “way” for each era (Bd, Z). A minority opinion attributed to the early commentator Mujāhid understands a law and a way as a reference to one law and one way, namely, Islam (Ṭ). Ibn Kathīr argues that for each among you We have appointed a law and a way, the word “Quran” was elided, but meant to be understood, so that the phrase would read, “for each among you We have appointed [the Quran] as a law and a way,” indicating the universality of Quranic rulings. These more exclusivist readings, however, seem inconsistent with the verse’s clear implication that it is the Divine Will that there be multiple religious communities, as expressed in the next line of this verse, had God willed, He would have made you one community (Ṭ). Grammatically, this is a counterfactual conditional statement indicating that human beings do not exist as one (religious) community, because God has not willed it as such. See also 2:213; 10:19; 11:118; 16:93; 42:8, where the reality of multiple human religious communities is also mentioned.

Moreover, the present verse goes on to state a Divine purpose for this plurality of religious forms, namely, that He might try you in that which He has given you, by testing your obedience (Ṭ). Thus like other modes of human differentiation mentioned in the Quran—including gender, race, and social status (cf. 49:13)—the existence of different religious communities can be understood as a matter of Divine Wisdom whose intention is advancing the spiritual good of human beings. A good example of religious differentiation as a test of obedience can be seen in 2:143–45, where God is said to appoint different directions of prayer (qiblahs) for different communities; He appointed for the Muslims a qiblah different from that of the People of Book, so that He would know those who follow the Messenger from those who turn back. Commentators who interpret the different revealed religious forms as having validity only in particular historical situations, however, suggest that the existence of different religions is a “trial” to distinguish the faithful from those who disbelieve (Q) with regard to the religious form that was ordained by God for their own time, abrogating those that came before it (IK).

The subsequent command, vie with one another in good deeds (cf. 2:148; 3:114), however, seems most plausibly addressed to human beings as a whole (Ṭ) and thus supposes not a process of supersession among religious forms, but rather a contemporaneous existence of different religious communities competing in virtue. The competition is in good deeds and thus on the practical rather than theological level. Resolving the intractable theological differences between the religions may not be a vocation for religious adherents in this world; rather, these may be matters only resolved by God in the Hereafter, when He will inform you of that wherein you differ. This verse carries enormous importance for the question of religious pluralism from an Islamic perspective. Since it is one of the key verses confirming the essential truth of different religious forms and indicating that the formal
differences between religions have been Divinely ordained, it has played a central role in contemporary Islamic discussions of religious pluralism.

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And judge between them in accordance with what God has sent down, and follow not their caprices. And beware of them, lest they tempt thee away from some part of that which God has sent down unto thee. And if they turn away, know that God desires to smite them for some sin of theirs, and surely many among mankind are iniquitous.

This verse repeats the injunction to judge between the People of the Book according to scripture, and many of the major commentators note that it is the Islamic scripture alone by which the Prophet should judge (Q, Ṭ). The verse also repeats the warning not to follow the caprices of the People of the Book. Ḳabr ʿAbbās links the warning to the Prophet about being “tempted away from” the revelations he has been given to a reported incident in which a group of Madinan Jewish authorities, including Ibn Ṣūriyā (see 5:41c), tried unsuccessfully to persuade the Prophet to side with them in a dispute they had with some of their fellow coreligionists in Madinah; they “tempted” him with the suggestion that, if he were to rule in their favor, they would become believers in his message and confirm the truth of his prophethood and that, given their influence, the wider Jewish population would follow them in this matter (IK, Q, Ṭ, Z).

For some, the fact that the Quran here warns the Prophet about the possibility of his being “tempted” by them indicates that, although prophets never sin intentionally, they may have lapses of judgment or make errors (Q, R). The warning, however, seems to relate generally and plausibly to the Prophet and to the Quran’s concern, discussed in vv. 41–47, that the Jews follow the Torah rulings as they had been revealed to them, without alteration. And some say that the warning to the Prophet is that the Jews might mislead him into issuing an incorrect ruling by lying to him about the true content of the Torah and the penalties it prescribes (Ṭs). If the Jews should turn away from the Prophet’s ruling, the Quran seems to console the Prophet by telling him that their refusal merely reflects God’s desire to smite them for some sin of theirs. For al-Rāzī, this proves that all good and evil comes about through the Will of God for some ultimate purpose.

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Is it the judgment of the Age of Ignorance that they seek? And who is fairer in judgment than God, for a people who are certain.

50 The Age of Ignorance (jāhiliyyah; cf. 3:154; 33:33) refers to the era in Arabia prior to the coming of Islam, an era marked by idolatry and a culpable “ignorance” of true religion. The judgment of the Age of Ignorance, unguided as it was by any religious law, was governed solely by human opinion and caprice (IK). The reference to the judgment of the Age of Ignorance may pertain particularly to the issue of the differential penalties for killing reportedly meted out among the Jewish clans according to the social status of killer and killed (R, Z; see 2:178c; 5:45c). Such judgment, which takes social status into consideration, was characteristic of the tribal system in Arabia, but unacceptable in Divine Law (cf. 4:135; 5:45c). The verse thus serves as a chastisement to those who would reject the Prophet’s judgment because it did not accord with their own wishes, reminding them that such approaches to judgment are the hallmark of an idolatrous age ignorant of Divine Law and its ultimate justice, benefit, and mercy (IK, Ṭ).

51 O you who believe! Take not Jews and Christians as protectors. They are the protectors of one another. And whosoever takes them as protectors, surely he is of them. Truly God guides not wrongdoing people.

51 This verse addressed to Muslims (O you who believe) forbids them to take Jews and Christians as protectors (awliyāʾ). Awliyāʾ (sing. walī) can also mean “friends” or “allies” (see also 3:28c; 4:139c), but here more likely denotes those whom one would turn to as a protector or dominant authority. This term and the verbal noun from the same root, walāyah, are used in the Quran to denote the bonds of loyalty, mutual protection, and friendship that ideally mark the relationship between members of the same religious community (see, e.g., 8:72; 9:71). Although this is the only verse in the Quran in which believers are urged not to take Jews and Christians, specifically, as protectors, believers are elsewhere urged to avoid taking as protectors those who disbelieve (3:28; 4:89, 139, 144), those who mock their religion (v. 57), God’s enemies (60:1), and even close relatives who prefer disbelief to belief (9:23). That Jews and Christians are protectors of one another indicates that they realize those bonds of loyalty among themselves, as separate
religious communities; and in vv. 80–81, they are criticized for having themselves taken “disbelievers” as protectors.

This verse reportedly concerned certain Madinan Muslims who had political allies and protectors among the Jews. One report tells of the Companion ʿUbādah ibn al-Ṣāmit, one of the natives of Madinah who had become Muslim (Aṣār) but had maintained alliances of mutual protection with the Jewish clans. He came to the Prophet to renounce his attachment to them and to declare that his only “protectors” were God, the Prophet, and the believers (see v. 55). Another Madinan Muslim, ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ubayy, subsequently came to the Prophet declaring his need to maintain a similar relationship of protection with his Jewish allies, and this verse then came down, instructing him and believers generally not to do so (Q, R, Ṭ). Another account reports that after the Muslims suffered the military loss at Uḥud, some Muslims, feeling vulnerable, established allies among the Jewish clans. This verse was meant to forbid this practice (Ṭ).

The verse warns that whoever takes the Jews and Christians as protectors is of them, meaning one of them. Thus to seek an alliance of mutual protection with Jews or Christians is to identify oneself as one of them, since the relationship of mutual protection (walāyah) with one’s coreligionists is what defines one, in part, as a member of the religious community. See also 3:28 and 4:139, where taking such allies apart from the believers—that is, apart from fellow Muslims—is explicitly criticized. For some this means that the status of one who allies with members of another religious community, such as with Jews or Christians, has the same status, legally and theologically, as the other members of that religious community (Q, Ṭū).

The verse’s prohibition against alliances of protection with those outside the Muslim community likely had much to do with the fluid and somewhat precarious social and political situation of the fledgling Islamic community during the time of the Prophet; and it is important to note that Islamic Law, developed after the Islamic state had become fully established, allowed agreements of mutual protection with non-Muslim states and political entities. According to some commentators, this verse also means, in part, that the relationships of inheritance between those who ally themselves with another group and the members of the Muslim community are nullified, since the root for awliyāʾ/walī can relate to inheritance as well as to mutual protection (Q, Ṭṣ).

The word for protector (awliyāʾ/walī) can also mean “friend,” and thus the verse may cast doubt on the acceptability of Muslims maintaining amiable relations with Jews and Christians, leading some but not all to conclude that one should not have close relationships with them or confide in them (Z). Some commentators include a report that the second Caliph, ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, adduced this verse in an (unsuccessful) attempt to persuade his provincial governor, Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī, to stop employing the services of his Christian scribe (IK, R, Z). Nonetheless, most commentators as well as the reported occasion of revelation for
this verse make clear that here the word connotes something closer to “protector” or “ally” and situates it in a context of the Islamic community struggling to define and establish itself against those who were enemies of the religion. The verse should not be interpreted as forbidding friendly relations with Jews and Christians on a purely personal level, since such a reading would contradict v. 5, which allowed for the most intimate of personal relationships—marriage—to exist between Muslim men and Jewish and Christian women, and 60:7–8, which states that Muslims may behave justly and kindly to any who do not fight them on account of religion or otherwise oppress them.

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Yet thou seest those in whose hearts is a disease hastening to them, saying, “We fear lest a change of fortune should befall us.” It may be that God will grant victory, or a command from Him. And then they shall be remorseful for that which they secretly harbored in their souls.

52  Those in whose hearts is a disease describes those of impure intentions (33:32) or those who secretly harbor in their souls a deep religious hypocrisy or doubt (see 2:8–11; 24:47–50; 33:12, 60; 47:20, 29; 74:31). This verse may be addressing the specific case of ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ubayy, mentioned in connection with the previous verse, or more likely hypocrites in general, who, fearing a change of fortune, attempted to “hedge their bets” by establishing supportive alliances with those outside the Muslim community who would protect them if the community suffered adversity (R, Ṭ). Such people are warned that God may grant a victory (fatḥ)—widely understood as a reference to the future Muslim victory over religious opponents (R, Z) or over the Makkans in 8/630 (Ṭ)—which will cause them to regret their hypocrisy (that which they secretly harbored in their souls). The word fatḥ can also mean “judgment,” so another reading is that God may “grant a judgment,” but many reconcile the two readings by considering the conquest of Makkah to manifest God’s ultimate judgment in favor of the Muslim believers over the Makkan idolaters (Ṭ). He may also send a command that will cause similar regret, and many early commentators interpret this as the implementation of the tax (jizyah) on the non-Muslim residents of the Islamic state (Q, Ṭ; see 9:29) or the later expulsion of the Jews and Christians from the central regions of Arabia (R, Z). Alternately, some suggest that this command might be a sudden revealing of the insincere intentions of the hypocrites (Ṭ, Z). According to al-Rāzī, it may be that God will grant victory indicates a promised certainty, not a

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mere possibility, as the wording may literally suggest.

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53 And those who believe will say, “Are these the ones who swore by God with their most solemn oaths that they were with you?” Their deeds have come to naught, and they have become losers.

53 If the command that God may bring in v. 52 represents a sudden revealing of the hidden insincerity of the hypocrites, as some have posited, then the believers’ question here is an expression of surprise at the hypocrisy of those who had sworn their most solemn oaths that they were with them as well as of gratitude for God’s granting success to those who were sincere in their faith (R, Ṭ, Z). Alternately, the believers’ question may be addressed to the Jews with whom some Muslims had sought alliance, meaning, Are these (hypocrites) the ones who swore by God . . . that they were with you (the Jews); see also 59:11, where the hypocrites are reported to have vowed their protection for their Jewish allies (Z). The Quran and Islamic teachings in general explicitly require both belief and “good deeds” for salvation (see, e.g., 2:25; 3:57; 4:57). Although some schools of theology have accepted the possibility of eventual salvation through faith alone, most have considered works to be indicative of or related to faith, and all have agreed, on the basis of this and similar verses, that works in the absence of proper faith will be meaningless on the Day of Judgment (Z) and effectively come to naught (cf. 2:217; 5:5; 6:88; 7:147; 9:17; 18:105; 33:19; 39:65; 47:32), since they merit no reward and have no salvific value (R, Ṭ, Z). Those who do good deeds without faith are the losers in the Hereafter, meaning that they will perish for their lack of faith, despite their deeds (Ṭ). In a deeper sense, what one might consider “good deeds” are not really “good” unless they are combined with faith.

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54 O you who believe! Whosoever among you should renounce his religion, God will bring a people whom He loves and who love Him, humble toward the believers, stern toward the disbelievers, striving in the way of God, and fearing not the blame of any blamer. That is the Bounty of
God, which He gives to whomsoever He will. And God is All-Encompassing, Knowing.

54 Cf. 4:133; 6:133; 14:19; 35:16; 47:38. This verse makes it clear that those who renounce (yartadda) the religion of Islam do no harm to God or ultimately to His religion, since God will replace them with those who are sincerely bound to God by mutual love. As this verse immediately follows the discussion of improper alliances with members of the Jewish and Christian communities in vv. 51–53, it may suggest that such alliances are tantamount, in some cases, to apostasy (irtidād, from the same root as yartadda; ر، ت). However, this should not be understood in absolute terms, since both the Prophet and the early Muslim authorities engaged in treaty relations with non-Muslim powers or groups, and the Christian king of Abyssinia famously sheltered and protected a group of Muslims from persecution in Makkah prior to the migration to Madinah. The problem emerges in situations in which such alliances entail the risk of division among the Muslims or betrayal of the Muslim community by or in favor of its enemies. Many major commentators consider the verse as referring to and foretelling the apostasy of some Arab tribes during the later life of the Prophet as well as several other tribes who renounced their allegiance to the Madinan caliphate after the Prophet’s death (JJ, Q, R, Z).

Commentators have differed over the identity of those whom God will bring in place of the renouncers (cf. 4:133; 6:133; 14:19; 35:16; 47:38). Many consider it a reference to the first caliph, Abū Bakr, who successfully fought the apostate Arab tribes (IK, ت, R, Z). Many also note that it may refer, on the basis of a ḥadīth, to Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī and his tribe or Yemeni tribes in general, who played a major role in the Islamic conquests under the second caliph, ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (IK, Q, R, ت, Z). Less widely reported interpretations consider it a reference to the Madinan Helpers (أنصار; ت, ت), or to the people of Salmān al-Fārsī—that is, the Persians—also on the basis of a ḥadīth, although one less widely reported than the one involving Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī (R, ت, Z). Additionally, some raise the possibility that the reference may be to ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), the Prophet’s cousin, son-in-law, and close Companion as well as the fourth caliph. ʿAlī carried the standard at the Battle of Khaybar (7/629), and on the eve of the battle the Prophet reportedly said, “Tomorrow I shall give the standard to one who loves God and His Messenger, and whom God and His Messenger love” (R, ت, ت). Despite these differing views, the reference is likely general as well as historical and is meant to indicate that God will never lack for sincere servants, despite the perfidy and hypocrisy of others.

Interpretations of this verse were sometimes connected to Sunni-Shiite debates about the relative merits of Abū Bakr, whom Sunnis agree is the legitimate first caliph, and ʿAlī, whom Shiites believe should have been caliph immediately after
the death of the Prophet. The fact that the verse could be considered a reference to Abū Bakr or to ʿAlī inspired some commentators to issue long defenses of its proper attribution to either Abū Bakr (R) or ʿAlī (Ṭs, Ṭū), primarily on the basis of which one best exemplified the other characteristics mentioned in the verse: humble toward the believers, stern toward the disbelievers, striving in the way of God.

Additionally, some Shiite commentators interpret the verse’s mention of those who renounce their religion as a reference to those who rebelled against the authority of ʿAlī’s caliphate, particularly the people of Baṣrah, who initiated the First Civil War (36–40/656–61) during his tenure as Caliph; and some Shiite reports indicate that ʿAlī cited this verse during the opening battle of the First Civil War in Baṣrah (Ṭb, Ṭū). One Shiite commentator even connects this verse to what some early Shiites considered to be the “apostasy” of the Prophet’s Companions who endorsed the caliphate of Abū Bakr and rejected what they believed to be the rightful and Divinely granted authority of ʿAlī (Qm). This rather extreme view concerning non-Shiite Muslims was, however, later rejected by most Imāmī Shiite authorities. Nevertheless, some Shiite traditions consider those whom God will bring in the place of the renouncers to refer to the future Mahdī, understood by Shiites to be a descendant of ʿAlī who will restore the Muslim community to its rightful (ʿAlid) leadership and avenge the injustices perpetrated against the descendants of the Prophet (Qm, Ṭs). The Sunni commentator al-Rāzī, however, argues that this verse is among the strongest proofs against the extreme Imāmī Shiite contention that after the death of the Prophet, all those who confirmed the caliphate of Abū Bakr and neglected the authority of ʿAlī had “apostatized,” or renounced their religion. Al-Rāzī argues that since this verse promises that those who renounce their religion will be “replaced,” and these early Companions clearly were not, it belies this early Shiite claim.

This verse has also been extensively discussed among theological and mystical commentators because of the mutual and reciprocal nature of love between God and His sincere servants it suggests in the phrase a people whom He loves and who love Him. The Quran makes numerous statements about those whom God loves (the virtuous, the patient, the just) and those whom He does not (the sinners and transgressors), and love of God as a characteristic of the believers is also mentioned in 2:165 and commentary. The present verse is distinct, however, in that God’s love of certain people is directly linked to their love of Him.

Some commentators were theologically uncomfortable with the idea that a relationship of love could exist between a human being and God. For example, some gloss those who love Him as those who obey God and seek to please Him and those whom He loves as those whom He rewards for their obedience (Ṭū, Z). However, this interpretation of human beings’ love of God as “obedience” and God’s love of human beings as “reward” seems to reverse the implied causality in
the verse, since obedience (the servants’ love for God) should precede God’s reward thereof (His Love of them), whereas the verse suggests, conversely, that God’s love of people precedes their love for Him. Because the verse seems to indicate that God’s love for a person must precede that person’s love for God (R), some mystical commentators connect this verse to the idea that the human inclination toward God is the result of God’s having turned toward humanity first (Aj) or that God’s love for human beings necessarily engenders human love of God (Qu). For al-Ghazzālī, this means that human love of God in this verse cannot simply be glossed as obedience to God, which must logically come before God’s reward thereof (*Iḥyāʾ ulūm al-dīn*, v. 4, p. 393).

Yet some commentators criticized in the strongest terms those interpreters—particularly the Sufis—who posit a relationship of essential love between human beings and God (Z), given the incommensurability between the two. Mystical writers responded in several ways. Al-Ghazzālī, for example, argues that God’s love of anything, including humanity, is merely God’s love of Himself, since He is infinite and nothing exists outside of His Being; whereas human love for God is nothing but God’s intentional unveiling of Himself in the heart of the one seeking nearness to God, whose seeking itself is made possible only through God’s determination (*Iḥyāʾ*, v. 4, p. 437). The mystical poet Rūmī cites this verse in his major work, *Masnawī-i maʿnawī*, asserting that love is an attribute that belongs to God alone and thus that human beings participate in it in only a derivative fashion (bk. 5, 2184–90).

Mystical writers also discuss this verse as pointing to the distinct reality of love in the relationship between God and men and women. Al-Qushayrī, for example, asserts that God’s love for certain of His creatures is more particular than the Mercy that He shows toward all of His creatures. Although God’s “Mercy” includes all the blessings that God might bestow, His “Love” is a more exclusive and ennobling relationship that He has with certain of His servants. Al-Qushayrī further distinguishes the love of the servant for God from other forms of piety or obedience, stating that such love is a “subtle state” that allows the servant to find delight in the Presence of God, His Beloved, and leads to the complete “disappearance” of the lover’s separate existence in the remembrance (*dhikr*) of God. He describes it as an “intoxication” from which one never recovers and an “illness” for which there is no cure and for which no cure is sought.

The people whom He loves are also described as humble (adhillatan) toward fellow believers; *adhillatan* indicates not only humility, but also sympathy, mercy, and tenderness (R, Tb, Ṭū, Z). Toward the disbelievers, however, they are stern (*aʿizzah*), that is, harsh, showing their might. A parallel sentiment is expressed in 48:29, where the true followers of the Prophet are described as harsh against the disbelievers, merciful to one another. In acting so, in their striving in the way of God for the success of the religion, and in their fearing not the blame of any
blamer, they present a sharp contrast to the hypocrites addressed in vv. 51–53, who make improper and even treasonous alliances out of fear (Z). Many commentators connect striving in the way of God here with the early Muslim community’s struggle against the apostate tribes, mentioned above. However, in the discourse on love that al-Qushayrī offers on this verse, which is typical of the Sufi understanding of this phrase, striving in the way of God is purely spiritual, consisting of the struggle to maintain perfect obedience to God’s commands, to detach oneself from worldly attachments, and to stand witness to God at every moment. That is the Bounty of God refers to the existence of the meritorious spiritual qualities of the believers mentioned in this verse. For al-Rāzī, this is proof that all good things, including the righteous acts of human beings, come ultimately from God (R). For others, however, this simply refers to God’s Favor (luṭ; Ṭū, Z), by which He leads people toward belief and good actions.

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55 Your protector is only God, and His Messenger, and those who believe, who perform the prayer and give alms while bowing down.

55 This verse continues the discussion of protectors begun in v. 51, reiterating that the believers should take only God, and His Messenger, and those who believe as protectors (awliyāʾ; Ṭ). In this verse one’s primary protector (walī) is God, one of whose Names is Walī, and one then takes His Prophet and the other believers as awliyāʾ as a natural extension of or corollary to one’s walāyah in relation to God (Bḍ, R). Some consider this verse to be an endorsement of ʿUbādah ibn al-Ṣāmit (see 5:51c), who renounced his alliance with the Jewish clans and vowed his alliance solely to the Prophet and his community (IK, R). Others consider it to be a response to some Companions of the Prophet who complained about being socially ostracized by the Jewish clans Banū Qurayḥah and Banū Naḍīr (JJ, W).

Those who perform the prayer and give alms while bowing down can be understood as a description of the believers in general (Ṭ) or of the sincere believers who are untainted by hypocrisy (R, Z; cf. 9:71). To pray and give alms while bowing down may also indicate that one performs these religious deeds in a state of humility (R, Z; cf. 2:43, which also connects prayer and alms with “bowing down”). However, it is widely reported in both Shiite and Sunni commentaries that many early authorities, including the influential early commentators Ibn ʿAbbās and Mujāhid, considered this to be a specific reference to ʿAlī ibn Abī ʿṬālib, the Prophet’s son-in-law, cousin, and the fourth Islamic caliph. According to these
reports, the verse refers to an incident in which ʿAlī, while in the act of bowing during the prayer, gave his ring to a man requesting charity (Bd, IK, Ṭ, Z, W). The verse is thus seen as encouraging the practice of giving charity whenever it is requested and recommending that believers seek to emulate Alī’s high degree of virtue in refusing to delay giving the needed charity, even until the end of the prayer (Z). A minority tradition considers this verse to be a reference to Abū Bakr (R).

Shiites sometimes refer to this verse as the “verse of wilāyah/walāyah.” Although walī is generally translated “protector” or “friend,” the position of walī and the corresponding state of wilāyah/walāyah are also spiritual concepts that hold particular importance for Shiites, who have used these terms traditionally to refer to the unique spiritual authority of ʿAlī and his consequent right to succeed the Prophet as spiritual and political leader of the Muslim community. They consider this verse to be a reference to ʿAlī as the walī of the believers, after God and the Prophet, and thus interpret it as one of the clear indications of ʿAlī’s rightful authority over the Muslim community (Ṭb, Ṭū).

A number of Sunni authors who acknowledge the widespread connection of this verse to ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib nonetheless argue that traditions defending this thesis are not entirely sound (IK) or that they do not bear out the legitimist interpretations for ʿAlī that the Shiites attribute to them. Al-Rāżī, for example, denies that wilāyah/walāyah means anything other than friendship or mutual support here, rejecting the idea that it refers to a kind of spiritual authority and noting that ʿAlī did not reportedly adduce this verse in favor of his own right to the caliphate during a council (shūrā) that was convened to resolve the issue of the caliphate after the death of the second caliph, ʿUmar, in 22/644. Yet, the prevalence of the association of this verse with ʿAlī, even in Sunni commentaries and among some of the earliest authorities, argues strongly for its authenticity in the early Islamic tafsīr tradition.

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56 And whosoever takes as his protector God, and His Messenger, and those who believe—the party of God, they are the victorious!

56 Those who follow the injunction in vv. 51 and 55 to avoid taking protectors other than God, the Messengers, and the believers, are here described as the party of God (ḥizb Allāh)—a term that has been adopted by many groups in Islamic history up to today, including the Shiite movement and political party Hezbollah (an anglicized rendering of ḥizb Allāh) in contemporary Lebanon. Party of God is also used in 58:22, where it is described as consisting of those who shall
prosper, those with whom God is content, and those who are content with God; they are contrasted with the party of Satan in 58:19.

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57 O you who believe! Take not as protectors those who take your religion in mockery and as play, from among those who were given the Book before you, or the disbelievers, and reverence God, if you are believers.

This verse continues the discussion about those whom the believers should take as protectors. Those who take your religion in mockery and as play is understood to refer to those who feign belief outwardly, but harbor disbelief inwardly. The enemies of the believers are not only those who fight the religion, but also those who ridicule it. The Quran frequently mentions those who “mock” religion itself as well as the prophets (e.g., 15:11), the signs (e.g., 30:10), and the warnings of destruction sent by God (e.g., 11:8) and warns that they will eventually be destroyed by that which they used to mock (see, e.g., 6:10; 16:34; 39:48; 40:83; 45:33; 46:26). To take religion . . . as play is to engage in it vainly and without commitment or serious purpose (cf. 6:70; 7:51). This passage reportedly refers to hypocrites whom some of the Muslim believers had befriended, warning the Muslims to discontinue their close relations with them (R, Ṭ, W, Z). Alternately, it is said to refer to some Jews and idolaters who would mock Muslims when they made the prostration in prayer (Q).

The verse mentions both those who were given the Book before you, that is, Jews and Christians feigning belief in Islam, and the disbelievers. The latter is taken as a separate category referring to the idolaters (Ṭ). For the foundational legal scholar al-Shāfiʿī, this verse meant that Muslims should not take People of the Book as allies, even against the idolaters (Q). As discussed in 5:51c, the command seems to pertain specifically to the circumstances of the new Islamic community in Madinah. Some say that it was connected with an incident in which the Prophet refused the help of some Madinan Jews who offered to fight alongside him in the Battle of Uhud (3/625; Q); see 3:28c, where a similar incident is reported during the Battle of the Trench in 5/627.

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58 And when you call to prayer, they take it in mockery
When you call to prayer is considered a scriptural basis for the Islamic ritual practice of the call to prayer, technically referred to as the adhān (R, Z). This is the only verse that mentions the call to prayer directly, although it does not use the technical term, adhān. The call to prayer is ideally made publicly before each of the five daily prayers, and the text of the call in Sunni Islam is as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Allāh}^u \ \text{akbar, Allāh}^u \ \text{akbar (God is great! God is great!)}.
\text{Allāh}^u \ \text{akbar, Allāh}^u \ \text{akbar (God is great! God is great!)}.
\text{Ashhad}^u \ \text{an lā ilāha illa’Llāh (I bear witness that there is no god but God).}
\text{Ashhad}^u \ \text{anna Muhammad}^{nn} \ \text{rasūlu’Llāh (I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God).}
\text{Hayya ‘alā’l-ṣalāh (Come to the prayer).}
\text{Hayya ‘alā’l-falāḥ (Come to prosperity or salvation).}
\text{Allāh}^u \ \text{akbar, Allāh}^u \ \text{akbar (God is great! God is great!)}.
\text{Lā ilāha illa’Llāh (There is no god but God).}
\end{align*}
\]

The Shiite call to prayer adds Ashhad\(^u\) anna ʿAlīyy\(^an\) walī Allāh (“I bear witness that ʿAlī is the walī of God”) after Ashhad\(^u\) anna Muhammad\(^nn\) rasūlu’Llāh. It also adds the line Hayya ʿalā khayr al-ʿamal (“Come to the best of acts,” that is, prayer) after Hayya ʿalā’l-falāḥ.

Although the Prophet is said by some to have heard the call to prayer during his Night Journey (Q), this practice was instituted only after the Muslims began praying in the direction of the Kaʿbah, about two years after the migration from Makkah to Madinah, when some Companions of the Prophet are said to have had dreams about such a call to prayer, and several prominent Companions indicated the need for a public announcement of the times of prayer (Q). It is reported in connection with this verse that some Christians or Jews in Madinah would mock and cast ill omens upon the Prophet or the believers when they heard the call to prayer (IK, Q,T, Z); or that the disbelievers mocked the call to prayer as a religious innovation or as having an ugly sound (Q, R, W). They mock in this way only because they are a people who do not understand. According to al-Rāzī, those of real understanding know that prayer is the best of all human acts, and he quotes the saying, “The noblest movement is prayer, and the most beneficial stillness is fasting.”

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Say, “O People of the Book! Are you vengeful toward us for no other reason than that we believe in God and in that which has been sent down unto us and in that which was sent down before, and because most of you are iniquitous?”

This verse is similar to 7:126, where, after Pharaoh’s sorcerers repent and come to believe in Moses, Pharaoh threatens to kill them, and they respond, *You take vengeance upon us only because we believed in the signs of our Lord when they came unto us.* See also 85:8. One report considers this verse to have come down in relation to some Jews of Madinah who broke with the Prophet because of his affirmation of the prophethood of Jesus (referenced in the phrase *that which was sent down before*), which the Jews did not accept (R, T). The verse also indicates that their rejection of the Prophet had its roots in the “iniquity” of many among them, that is, their own deviation from the religion and laws of God, which compelled them to harbor ill will toward the Prophet, the Quranic message, and the Muslim community.

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Say, “Shall I inform you of something worse than that by way of recompense from God? Whomsoever God has cursed and upon whom is His Wrath, and among whom He has made some to be apes and swine, and who worship false deities, such are in a worse situation, and further astray from the right way.”

*By way of recompense* translates *mathūbatān*, which usually denotes a positive “recompense,” a reward rather than a punishment. Its use here to introduce Divine punishment is therefore ironic, and this verse is similar in tone to those in which the Prophet is told to give glad tidings of punishment to come (Z; see, e.g., 4:138 and commentary). *Whomsoever God has cursed* means those He has exiled from His Mercy (T). *Among whom He made some to be apes* is likely a reference to God’s having said to those Jews who violated the Sabbath, *Be you apes* (see 2:65; 7:163–66). That God *made some to be apes and swine* can therefore be understood as a metaphor for the state—in either this world or the next—of those
who deliberately violate religious Law (see 2:65c). These can also be seen as a reference to God’s changing their hearts, hardening them (see 2:74; 5:13; 6:43) and making them prone to heedlessness (ghaflah; Aj). Some say that *apes* refers to those who broke the Sabbath, and *swine* refers to those among Jesus’ followers who betrayed him during his last supper (Q, R). That they *worship false deities* (ṭāghūt) is also mentioned in 4:51 (on ṭāghūt, see 4:51–52c) and may refer to the Israelites’ worship of the golden calf (Z; for Quranic accounts of this incident, see 7:148–56; 20:86–97).

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61 When they come to you, they say, “We believe.” But they certainly entered with disbelief and they have certainly left with it, and God knows best what they were concealing.

61 This verse reportedly refers to a group of Madinan Jews who came to the Prophet claiming to believe in him and in the message he brought. Their claims were disingenuous, however, and God is said to have made their hypocrisy known to the Prophet (Ṭ, Z).

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62 Thou seest many of them hastening to sin and enmity, and consuming what is forbidden. Evil indeed is that which they were doing.

62 For the claim that the Jews of Madinah were consuming what is forbidden, see 5:42; 5:42c, where this is widely reported to refer to illicit gain and bribery. The sin to which they hasten is glossed, by some, as “lying” (R, Z) or as “disbelief,” although it may relate to all manner of sin (Ṭ). Their enmity may refer to several things mentioned elsewhere in the Quran, including their hostility toward the Prophet, their general wrongdoing, and their transgression of the limits set by God (Ṭ, Z).
Why do the sages and the rabbis not forbid them from their sinful speech and their consuming what is forbidden? Evil indeed is that which they were working.

Sages translates rabbāniyyūn (see 5:44; 5:43–44c). If the previous verse criticizes those Jews who were hastening to sin and enmity, the present one criticizes the religious leaders among the Jews who, while knowing better, did nothing to forbid their followers from engaging in sinful speech and illicit consumption. They were not “judging according to the Judgment of God” (Ṭ); see also vv. 44, 47. This sin of omission on the part of the knowledgeable sages can be considered more serious and deeply rooted than the sin of ordinary people who lack extensive religious knowledge. This difference is manifest in the parallel closing lines of vv. 62 and 63. Of the common sinners among the Jews, v. 62 says, Evil indeed is that which they were doing, referring to their general sinfulness and lack of belief. But in v. 63, in reference to the sages, the Quran states, Evil indeed is that which they were working, meaning what they brought about through their refusal to forbid wrongful behavior, despite their ability to have changed it by acting and ruling correctly on the basis of their knowledge (R). Some early authorities, such as Ibn ʿAbbās and Ḍaḥḥāk (d. 105/723), reportedly considered this to be among the severest and most frightening verses of the Quran (R, Ṭ, Z), perhaps because of the warning it implies for those who possess religious knowledge, like themselves, but who fail to live up to the moral responsibilities incumbent upon such persons.

The Jews say, “God’s Hand is shackled.” Shackled are their hands, and they are cursed for what they say. Nay, but His two Hands are outstretched, He bestows as He wills. Surely that which has been sent down unto thee from thy Lord will increase many of them in rebellion and disbelief. And We have cast enmity and hatred among them till the Day of Resurrection. As often as they ignite a flame for war, God extinguishes it. They endeavor to work corruption upon the earth. And God loves not the workers of corruption.
The image of “shackled hands” is sometimes used in discussions of the torments of Hell and the helplessness of those faced with Divine punishment in the Hereafter (e.g., 13:5; 34:33; 40:71), but it is also associated with miserliness (see 17:29). Miserliness is clearly the intended meaning here, and those who make this statement are suggesting that God withholds His Provision and His Bounty, at least from them (Ṭ). The Divine response to this charge is to turn the accusation back on the accusers: shackled are their hands. This response indicates, as do many other verses, the reflexive nature of sin and falsehood in the Quran, as the very wrong one intends for others is unwittingly brought upon oneself (e.g., 2:9: They would deceive God and the believers; yet they deceive none but themselves). Shackled are their hands may also be read, “May their hands be shackled!,” that is, from all good things (Ṭ). They are cursed for what they say. To be cursed is widely understood to mean “exiled from God’s Mercy” (Ṭ).

Al-Rāzī acknowledges that the Jews, as such, certainly do not make such claims about God’s Hand being shackled as part of their doctrinal beliefs. In fact, they are quite aware of God’s Might and Power and of the impossibility that such a claim about God could be true. He thus suggests that the Jews who said this did not do so in earnest, but rather as a way of ridiculing the Muslims. He suggests, for example, that they would take a Quranic question like, Who shall lend God a goodly loan? (2:245; 5:12; 57:11), pretend to understand it literally—that God is in actual need of a “loan” from His servants—and then argue facetiously that God’s Hand is shackled by need in order to make the Quranic question seem absurd. Alternately, he suggests that when the Jews saw the dire financial situation in which the early Muslim community at Madinah found itself, they may have said mockingly that the hand of the “God of Muhammad” was shackled, as it may have appeared to them that He did not materially help His community (R). Some commentators suggest that when the fortunes of the Jews of Madinah changed for the worse with the rise of Islam in Madinah and Arabia generally, they said, God’s Hand is shackled, meaning that He now withholds His blessings from the Jews as a community (R, Z). Their claim that God’s Hand is shackled may also refer or relate to their claim elsewhere that God would not punish them in the Fire save for a number of days (2:80; 3:24), since this latter claim suggests a certain limitation on the part of God.

The claim that God’s Hand is shackled is then contrasted with the image of His two Hands... outstretched (mabsūṭatān), that is, open and giving as He bestows as He wills. This description of God’s Hands as outstretched (mabsūṭatān) forms part of the Quranic basis for the Divine Name al-Bāsīṭ, “the Open-Handed”; and in several verses, it is said that God outspreads (yabsūṭu) and straitens provision for whomsoever He will (13:26; 17:30; 28:82; 29:62; 30:37; 34:36, 39; 39:52; 42:12).

The apparently anthropomorphic image of God’s two Hands also occurs in 38:75, where God indicates that He created Adam with His two Hands. Some
interpreters consider all references to God’s “Hand” (in the singular or the dual) as
metaphors for the Blessings He bestows on His creatures (as in this verse) or for
His Strength and Power. See, for example, 38:45, where Abraham, Isaac, and
Jacob are described as possessed of strength (ūlu’l-aydī), literally, “possessed of
hands.” (Ṭ). Some Islamic scholars argued that references to God’s Hand or Hands
in the Quran have to be understood literally, even if God’s Hand cannot be
considered to be of the same nature as a human hand, thereby rejecting an explicitly
anthropomorphic interpretation (Ṭ). Some suggest that the claim God’s Hand is
shackled, using the singular “hand,” is refuted by the statement His two Hands are
outstretched, using the dual “two Hands” in order to indicate the great abundance
of God’s provision bestowed upon His creatures (R, Z), although al-Ṭabarī rejects
this interpretation, arguing that the dual form always represents two specific things
and cannot be made to signify simple abundance (Ṭ). If God’s Hand can be seen as
a metaphor and symbol for the blessings He bestows, then His “two Hands” might
be a metaphor for two different kinds of blessings God might bestow, for example,
the blessings of this world and of the Hereafter, or outward and inward blessings,
or the blessings of granting benefit and preventing harm (R).

This verse further mentions the paradoxical idea, found elsewhere in the Quran,
that prophecy or revelation, although intended to bring guidance, may actually lead
some people farther astray (cf. 3:19; 5:68; 8:2; 9:124; 17:41, 60, 82; 35:42; 71:6;
74:31). Here the revelation the Prophet receives from God serves to increase many
of them in rebellion and disbelief. Revelation and prophecy are thus referred to in
several places as the Criterion (Furqān; 2:53, 185; 3:4; 21:48; 25:1), meaning that
part of their function is to distinguish and separate believers from disbelievers, the
latter being frequently described as repelled by the Divine message, as in
74:49–51: So what ails them that they turn away from the Reminder, as if they
were frightened asses fleeing from a lion?

As a punishment for their rebellion and disbelief, God casts enmity and hatred
among them—that is, among the Jews or the People of the Book in general—till the
Day of Resurrection (see also v. 14, where this internal enmity and hatred is also
attributed to the Christians). Some commentators suggest that this means that God
casts enmity and hatred between the Jews and the Christians (Ṭ). The Jews
repeatedly ignite a flame for war, but God extinguishes it. Some interpret this as a
reference to their unsuccessful animosity to the Prophet’s mission (Ṭ), while other
commentators see it as a reference to a series of military losses for the Jews from
the time of the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions (which many consider the Quran
to allude to in 17:5). For the idea of “working corruption upon the earth,” see
5:33c; 30:41c.

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Had the People of the Book believed and been reverent, We would surely have absolved them of their evil deeds, and caused them to enter Gardens of bliss.

65 Had the People of the Book believed—that is, in the Quran and the prophethood of Muhammad—according to most commentators, they would have been forgiven their sins. Although “believe” is sometimes used to refer to the general act of believing in God and the Last Day among Jews and Christians as well as Muslims (see, e.g., 2:62; 5:69), the term “believer” is most commonly used in the Quran to refer to those who believe in all prophets and books, necessarily including the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran, and thus specifically to a believing member of the Islamic community; see 4:136c. For verses with a similar message concerning the People of the Book or earlier peoples, see 2:103; 7:96.

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Had they observed the Torah and the Gospel and that which was sent down unto them from their Lord, they would surely have received nourishment from above them and from beneath their feet. There is a moderate community among them; but as for many of them, evil is that which they do!

66 This is one of several verses in this surah indicating the importance of Jews and Christians following their own scriptures (see also vv. 44, 47, 68) and suggesting that these scriptures remain a source of spiritual nourishment. “Observing” the Torah and Gospel is understood by some commentators in a limited sense to mean merely upholding the covenant with God established in those scriptures in a general way, which would not preclude Jews and Christians from following the Prophet—indeed, according to some, it would require them to follow the Prophet Muhammad, whom the Quran indicates was inscribed in the Torah and Gospel (R; see 7:157; 61:6). It can also be understood as enjoining them to continue to uphold the rituals and laws prescribed in these scriptures (R) in keeping with the statement in v. 48 that God had prescribed a law and a way for every religious community. Yet, the verse also requires them to observe that which was sent down to them from their Lord. This is understood by many early commentators as referring to the Quran (Q, T), although some have thought it might
be a reference to certain prophetic books, such as the book of Daniel, found in the Hebrew scriptures, but outside of the Torah narrowly defined (Q, R).

For the People of the Book to observe both their own Scriptures and the Quran means, according to some commentators, that Jews and Christians should follow those teachings in the Torah and the Gospel that were either endorsed by the Quran or at least not declared false in it (Ṭ). Had they done this, they would surely have received nourishment from above them and from beneath their feet. Most commentators read this statement as an image of worldly prosperity, meaning that God would have sent them rain from the heavens and brought forth nourishing vegetation for them from the earth (R, Ṭ, Z). As such, it may be read either as a counterpart to the spiritual prosperity that it is said would be theirs if they had . . . believed and been reverent in v. 65 (R) or as a response to the claim in v. 64 that God’s Hand is shackled, since this claim suggests God’s withholding of worldly provision (Ṭ). Alternately, this metaphor for prosperity can be read as a spiritual allegory relating to what the verse itself says about the People of the Book following both their own scriptures and that which was sent down to them from their Lord (i.e., the Quran, according to most commentators). For the People of the Book, the nourishment from beneath their feet would be the teachings of their own scriptures—that is, the metaphorical spiritual seeds they have already “planted” in their hearts—and the nourishment from above them—that is, the life-giving rain—would be the Quran, both of which are sent down unto them from their Lord. Rain provides direct nourishment to human beings alongside the crops that come from the ground, but the rain also nourishes those very crops. Continuing the spiritual allegory, the Quranic message, like the rain, provides both direct spiritual nourishment to the People of the Book and indirect spiritual nourishment by bringing new life to their own scriptures, to their “nourishment from below.”

This verse indicates that among the Jews and Christians there remains a moderate community (ummatan wasatān), that is, a community that takes a middle course between extremes. The Arabic here is different from that used to describe the Muslim community as a middle community (ummatun muqtaṣidān; 2:143), but descriptions of moderation and balance are associated in a variety of ways with what is good and proper in the Quran (cf. 15:19; 17:29; 68:28). Consistent with the interpretation of the People of the Book following their own scriptures and accepting the Quranic message, some commentators understand moderate as describing those Jews and Christians who “moderate” their beliefs in a way consistent with that which was sent down unto them from their Lord, that is, the Quran. Specifically, they see it as a reference to those People of the Book who neither exaggerate the station of Jesus by considering him to be the son of God (as do the Christians) nor underestimate his spiritual rank by refusing to consider him a prophet of God (as do the Jews; Ṭ); rather, they see him as a Divinely sent prophet, as he is presented in the Quran. This statement may also be read in conjunction with
other passages in the Quran that describe those People of the Book who are just in their dealings with the Muslims (3:75; R), or those who take a middle course (muqaṣid) between wrongdoing and being those who are foremost in good deeds (35:32). Some commentators suggest that this “moderate community” may refer to People of the Book who have become believers by embracing Islam (Q, R) although this does not seem to fit with the description of them as “taking a middle course,” and if this is so, it is not clear why they should be differentiated from other Muslims who converted from paganism.

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67 O Messenger! Convey that which has been sent down unto thee from thy Lord, and if thou dost not, thou wilt not have conveyed His message. And God will protect thee from mankind. Surely God guides not disbelieving people.

67 This verse is situated in the middle of a long and often critical discussion of the People of the Book, leading some to suggest that the message the Prophet may have been hesitant to convey is the criticism of these other religious communities (T). Some read the threat if thou dost not, thou wilt not have conveyed His message to mean that if the Prophet were to conceal even the smallest part of what had been revealed to him, it would be as if he had not conveyed the message at all or as if he had concealed all of it (Z). According to one report, the Prophet stated the God had revealed to him that if he did not convey all of the revelation that came to him, God would punish him (Z). The Prophet’s wife ʿĀʾishah argued that this verse should serve as a sufficient refutation of those who claim the Prophet had concealed parts of the revelation that he received (IK, Q, T, Ṭs).

The verse’s assurance to the Prophet that God will protect thee from mankind does suggest, however, that he at times feared people’s reaction to the message. According to one report, when the Prophet was in Makkah and he and his followers were in constant danger from the Quraysh, the Prophet used to conceal some of the revelations that he received, but once the Prophet’s community strengthened, he was ordered in this verse to convey all that had been revealed to him. Alternately, some reports indicate that when the Prophet was in Makkah, he (or, variously, his uncle Abū Ṭalib) always arranged to have him guarded by others. After this verse was revealed, along with its promise of Divine protection, the Prophet indicated that fear left him completely (R, Ṭ), and he discontinued the practice of having guards (IK, Q). Others suggest that this assurance relates to an incident in which a Bedouin wanted to kill the Prophet and came upon him with a sword while the
Prophet was alone and unarmed. The Bedouin asked, “Who can protect you from me?” The Prophet answered, “God,” at which point the Bedouin’s hand began to tremble with fear, and the sword fell from his hand (Q, Ṭ). A similar story is told in relation to the revelation of v. 11 (see 5:11c).

Twelver Shiite commentaries explicitly connect this verse to the Prophet’s reported announcement at Ghadīr Khumm, just after the completion of his Farewell Pilgrimage in 10/632, regarding his cousin and son-in-law, ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, “For whomever I am his master (mawlā), ʿAlī is [also] his master (mawlā); O God, befriend the friend of ʿAlī and be the enemy of his enemy.” The Shiite commentaries suggest that the Prophet was hesitant to make this announcement, which Imāmī Shiites consider to be a matter of Divine inspiration, although it is not in the Quran, because he feared the reaction among some of his Companions. This verse was then revealed to him, indicating his duty to convey the Divine message and promising Divine protection for him, after which he stood with ʿAlī in front of his gathered Companions and made the announcement (al-ʿAyyāshī, Qm, Ṭb, Th, Ṭū).

A small number of Sunni commentators also link this verse to Prophetic statements relating to the spiritual merits of ʿAlī, including the statement, “For whomever I am his master, ʿAlī is [also] his master,” or to Ghadīr Khumm, specifically (Āl, Th). Other Sunni commentators connect this verse to the announcements the Prophet made during his sermon during the Farewell Pilgrimage, which preceded the Ghadīr Khumm event by a matter of days (IK), thus indicating, like the Shiite views above, that the verse pertains to directives the Prophet gave to his community at the very end of his life. Those reports that situate the revelation of this verse in the context of the Farewell Pilgrimage and related events, such as the Prophet’s announcement at Ghadīr Khumm, seem to be most plausible, since this sūrah is generally thought to be late Madinan in its entirety; many scholars maintain that vv. 1–11 of this sūrah were revealed in the context of the Prophet’s sermon during the Farewell Pilgrimage.

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68 Say, “O People of the Book! You stand on naught till you observe the Torah and the Gospel, and that which has been sent down unto you from your Lord.” Surely that which has been sent down unto thee from thy Lord will increase many of them in rebellion and disbelief. So grieve not for disbelieving people.

693
68 As in v. 66, this verse reiterates the importance of Jews and Christians observing both their own scriptures, the Torah and the Gospel, and *that which has been sent down unto you from your Lord*, which most commentators understand to mean the Quranic message brought by the Prophet (see 5:66; 5:66c). The idea that many of the People of the Book will be increased in rebellion and disbelief echoes v. 64, which indicates that *that which has been sent down unto* the Prophet will increase some of the People of the Book in “rebellion and disbelief” (see 5:64; 5:64c). Here, as elsewhere, the Prophet is told to *grieve not* for those who are unresponsive to the Divine message (cf. 5:26; 27:70). Some connect this verse to the injunction to the Prophet in the previous verse to *convey that which has been sent down* to him, indicating that this message to the People of the Book to follow their own scriptures as well as the Quran was what the Prophet had hesitated or feared to convey (R, Ṭ).

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69 Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Sabeans, and the Christians—whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness, no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve.

69 This verse is nearly identical to 2:62; see 2:62c. Compare this verse also to 22:17, where it is said that *God will judge between those who believe, the Jews, the Sabeans, the Christians, and the Magians* (or Zoroastrians, majūs), on the Day of Resurrection. This present verse, however, situated as it is within a sūrah largely devoted to the People of the Book, and within a long section that discusses the People of the Book critically, represents one of the most important Quranic affirmations of the potential of those outside the Muslim community to achieve salvation. Although Jews, Christians, and Sabeans are mentioned specifically, the verse also refers more broadly to *whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness*, thereby opening the possibility of salvation even beyond the Abrahamic faiths. This verse, along with v. 5, which allows intermarriage between Muslim men and People of the Book, and v. 48, which indicates that God has ordained more than one religious “law” and “way,” argues for the continued validity of Judaism, Christianity, and by extension other Divinely revealed religions, despite the strong criticism of certain Jewish and Christian doctrines and practices found here and elsewhere in the Quran.

The present verse affirms that for those who both believe and act properly, *no fear shall come upon them*—that is, they have no dread for their future after
resurrection—*nor shall they grieve*; that is, they have no sorrow about the past or about having left the earthly realm, for what they are certain to receive in the Hereafter is better (R). In other words, such people have no concern for either the future or the past, indicating that those who have achieved salvation are understood to live in the “eternal now” of the paradisal state.

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70 We indeed made a covenant with the Children of Israel, and sent messengers unto them. Whencesoever a messenger brought them what their souls did not desire, some they would deny and some they would slay.

This verse is one of several that mention the Divine covenant with the Children of Israel; see also 2:63, 83–84, 93; 4:154; 5:12; 7:134. For the Divine covenant with the People of the Book in general or Christians, see 3:187; 5:14; 7:169. See also the essay “The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions.” The rejection of previous messengers and prophets by their people is a common theme running throughout the Quran; for other references specifically to the Israelites’ rejection and slaying of certain prophets, see 2:87, 91; 3:183–84; 4:155 and commentary.

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71 And they supposed that there would be no trial, and so became blind and deaf. Then God relented unto them; then [again] many of them became blind and deaf. And God sees whatsoever they do.

In the Quran, spiritual insensitivity to the prophetic messages is frequently referred to as a kind of blindness or deafness (see, e.g., 2:171, 6:104; 7:64; 10:43; 11:28; 13:19; 27:4, 66, 81; 30:53; 41:17, 44; 43:36–37, 40), and it is said in 22:46: *Truly it is not the eyes that go blind, but it is hearts within breasts that go blind.* Moreover, this spiritual blindness is said to continue in the Hereafter (see, e.g., 17:72, 97; 20:102, 124–25). The Quran seems to assert both that there can be a preexisting moral “blindness” and “deafness” that impedes an individual’s ability to be spiritually convinced and moved by the messages of the prophets and that it is
the willful mocking, rejection, or transgression of those messages that leads to a state of blindness (see, e.g., 2:14–18). Because the Quran indicates that all human beings were born in a state of fitrah—that is, with the pure and primordial nature from God (30:30)—and have an innate awareness of spiritual truth or at least of the Lordship of God (7:172), many have understood “blindness” to the truth brought by the prophets to be the result of a certain moral deformity brought about by sin and repeated moral transgression itself or the result of a Divine “curse,” as punishment for sin (see, e.g., 47:23).

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They certainly disbelieve, those who say, “Truly God is the Messiah, son of Mary.” But the Messiah said, “O Children of Israel! Worship God, my Lord and your Lord.” Surely whosoever ascribes partners unto God, God has forbidden him the Garden, and his refuge shall be the Fire. And the wrongdoers shall have no helpers.

72 See v. 17, where the specific belief that God is the Messiah is also criticized as “disbelief,” and the commentary on this verse as well as other verses where the divinity of Jesus is directly or indirectly refuted (3:59; 4:171–72; 5:75, 116–17; 9:31). In the present verse, the words of the Messiah—that is, Jesus son of Mary—are adduced to refute any belief in his divinity. From the Islamic perspective, Jesus’ statement that God is my Lord and your Lord (also found in 3:51; 5:117; 19:36; 43:64) asserts his full humanity and “servanthood” in relation to God. The only parallel in the Gospel to the words attributed to Jesus in this verse is found in John 20:17, where Jesus refers to God as “my father and your father,” although this is not in the context of a command to worship God, as it is in the Quran, and the conception of God as “father,” as noted elsewhere, is problematic from a Quranic perspective (see, e.g., 5:18, where Jews and Christians are criticized for their claim to be the “children of God”). In the present verse and in 9:31, the criticism of the belief in the divinity of Jesus is followed by strong warning against “ascribing partners unto God” (shirk), leading some to consider any explicit claim that Jesus (or the Messiah) is God Himself to be a form of shirk and to see the warning and its consequences (being forbidden the Garden) as directed at those who make this claim (Z). Some major commentators, however, indicate that the explicit claim criticized in this verse is made only by certain sects among the Christians, mentioning, in particular, the Jacobites (R, T), who rejected
the notion of Christ’s “dual nature” as human and Divine and instead asserted a more essential unity between God and Christ.

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73 They certainly disbelieve, those who say, “Truly God is the third of three,” while there is no god save the one God. If they refrain not from what they say, a painful punishment will befall those among them who disbelieved.

73 Whereas the previous verse criticizes belief in the divinity of Jesus, this verse criticizes the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, or at least an exaggerated form of that doctrine in which God is one of three separate entities to be worshipped. Some commentators understood the Christian Trinity criticized here to comprise God, Jesus, and his mother, Mary, as three distinct deities (R, T), based on v. 75, where the human characteristics of Mary and Jesus are emphasized, presumably in response to those who considered them divine, and v. 116, where the divinization of Mary among some followers of Jesus is directly criticized. Commentators were generally aware, however, that the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity considered God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and not Mary, as three persons in a single Divinity (IK, Q, R), and some argued that it was only certain sects, such as the Jacobites and Nestorians, who held to a belief in three distinct deities (IK, Q) Al-Rāzī understood the three persons in the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity to represent for Christians three aspects of God, respectively: His Essence, His Word, and His Life. Al-Rāzī’s explanation puts trinitarian doctrine in terms that make some sense in relation to the Islamic view of God’s Essence and Attributes, but it does not persuade him to view this doctrine as acceptable, and he describes it, nonetheless, as clear error.

In 4:171, the People of the Book are told merely to refrain from saying Three, which is commonly understood to refer to the trinitarian doctrine; in the present verse, saying that God is the third of three is clearly identified as a form of disbelief, and a painful punishment is threatened for those who do not “refrain” from asserting this, as they were commanded to do in 4:171. Some commentators argue that the threat of punishment is not only for certain sects among the Christians, but for Christians in general, since the Quran suggests here and elsewhere that certain common Christian doctrines are forms of “disbelief,” and the punishment in this verse is threatened for all who disbelieve (T, Z), or at least those who persist in this disbelief and do not turn to God in repentance (v. 74), as they are urged to do in the next verse (R, Z). However, the verse clearly threatens punishment only
for those among them who disbelieved, suggesting that it is not for all Christians. Moreover, an interpretation that considers all Christians to be barred from the Garden in the next life would openly contradict both v. 69 and 2:62 (as well as 3:113), where Christians and anyone who believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve, and is not consistent with the description of Christian virtue in vv. 82–85. For a longer discussion of the Quranic criticism of trinitarian doctrine, see 4:171c.

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Will they not turn to God in repentance and seek His forgiveness? And God is Forgiving, Merciful.

74 In this verse, those who hold to doctrines of Jesus’ nature and the Trinity that contradict the principle of the Oneness of God (tawḥīd) are urged to repent.

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The Messiah, son of Mary, was naught but a messenger—messengers have passed away before him. And his mother was truthful. Both of them ate food. Behold how We make the signs clear unto them; yet behold how they are perverted!

75 Jesus is described as a messenger of God throughout the Quran, and in 4:171, as here, he is described as only a messenger in order to refute claims about his divinity, although in 4:171 he is identified as His Word and as a Spirit from Him. Muhammad is also described as being a “messenger,” and a statement identical to the one in this verse is made concerning Muhammad in 3:144: Muhammad is naught but a messenger; messengers have passed before him. Jesus’ mother, Mary, is described as truthful (ṣiddīqah), a feminine construction of sīdīq, a term sometimes used in the Quran to describe prophets (see, e.g., 19:41, in relation to Abraham; 19:56, regarding Idrīs) or particularly saintly people; see, for example, 4:69, where the truthful are said to be in the company of the prophets, the witnesses, and the righteous, as those whom God has blessed. Some connect her description as truthful (ṣiddīqah) to her role as one of those who affirmed the truth of Jesus’ prophethood and message, just as the Prophet Muhammad’s close
Companion Ābu Bakr was given the title al-Ṣiddīq, because he affirmed the truth of Muhammad’s miraculous Night Journey (Z). Others connect it to the Quranic statement that Mary confirmed (ṣaddaqat) the Words of her Lord and His Books (66:12; R).

The assertion in this verse that both Mary and Jesus ate food is meant to affirm their full humanity and refute those who see them as divine. Of course, Christian theology also sees Christ as “fully human” as well as “fully divine,” and the Quranic view of Jesus as fully human is consistent with certain verses of the New Testament, such as Luke 18:19 and Philippians 2:6–8, which stress Jesus’ humanity in relation to God.

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Say, “Do you worship, apart from God, that which has no power to benefit or harm you, when it is God Who is the Hearing, the Knowing?”

The Quran frequently poses the rhetorical question contained in this verse, either directly or through the words of the prophets, as an argument against those who would worship something other than God; see 10:18, 106; 13:16; 20:88–89; 21:62–66; 22:12; 25:55; 26:71–73.

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Say, “O People of the Book! Do not exaggerate in your religion beyond the truth, and follow not the caprices of a people who went astray before, and led many astray, and strayed from the right way.”

See 4:171, where the same command is given to the People of the Book in general not to exaggerate in . . . religion. In both verses, however, the command is addressed primarily to the Christians in relation to their claims of divinity for Jesus. The people who went astray before is understood by some to be a reference to the Jews, who rejected and disbelieved in Christ’s prophethood and message entirely (T). Others consider the people who went astray before to refer to the early leaders and authorities of the Christian community who established the Christological and trinitarian doctrines criticized here and who, through these doctrines and later through their rejection of the Prophet Muhammad, led many astray (IK, Z). Still others consider the verse to be addressed to both Jews and Christians, urging them to accept the truth that Jesus was a major prophet of God and to believe in the message and signs that he brought, but not to exaggerate beyond this to make claims of his divinity or his sonship in relation to God (Q); or it urges them to avoid various errors they or their religious leaders had made in the past, as discussed in this long section beginning in v. 41 (R, Ts).

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Those who disbelieved among the Children of Israel were cursed by the tongue of David and Jesus son of Mary. That was because they disobeyed and used to transgress.
Here and elsewhere in the Quran, the majority of commentators read cursed as meaning “exiled from Divine Mercy.” In the present verse, the disbelievers among the Israelites are cursed not by God, but by the prophets David and Jesus. According to some early commentators, this refers to statements concerning disbelieving Israelites found in the Psalms of David and the Gospel of Jesus; some mention that they were also cursed in the Torah of Moses and in the Quran brought by Muhammad (Ṭ, Z). Some commentators connect the cursing by David and Jesus with God’s curse, mentioned in v. 60, by which some were made into apes and swine (Ṭ). Many also connect the cursing by David with the curse upon the Sabbath violators mentioned in 7:163–66, who are reported to be the people of Eilat (JJ, R, Z), and link the cursing by Jesus to those who disbelieved after the miraculous table spread with food had been sent down to Jesus (see vv. 114–18; JJ, R, Z).

They would not forbid one another from the wrong they committed. Evil indeed is that which they used to do.

The importance of “forbidding wrong” is repeatedly mentioned in the Quran (3:114; 9:112; 22:41; 31:17). Enjoining right and forbidding wrong among those in one’s own community is an obligatory religious duty in Islamic Law, and as such it is both a central moral responsibility for individual Muslims and an important basis of the moral society (see 3:104c). The disbelieving Israelites are criticized in the present verse for not forbidding the wrong they committed, that is, wrongs committed among themselves or by their own people. In relation to the importance of forbidding wrong, one commentator cites the hadith, “The best striving (jihād) is a word of truth” (Th). See v. 63, where the rabbis and sages among the Jews are blamed for not forbidding their followers from sinful speech and unlawful consumption.

Thou seest many of them allying with those who have disbelieved. Evil indeed is that which they have sent forth for their souls: the anger of God is upon them, and in punishment shall they abide.
And had they believed in God and the Prophet, and that which was sent down unto him, they would not have taken them as protectors, but many of them are iniquitous.

80–81 The People of the Book are sometimes considered “disbelievers” not in an absolute sense, but only insofar as they do not meet the Quranic requirement of believing in all prophets and scriptures, including Muhammad and the Quran. These verses, however, establish a clear distinction between the People of the Book and the disbelievers, since the former are criticized for allying with, or “taking protectors among,” those who have disbelieved. The Quran also forbids Muslim believers from seeking protectors among the “disbelievers” and “wrongdoers,” who are protectors of one another (8:73; 45:19), and even among Jews and Christians (5:51). Vv. 80–81 are understood as referring to certain Jews of Madinah, or certain hypocrites among them, who allied with the idolaters (mushrikūn) against the Muslim believers (Q, Ṭ, Z); for a discussion of reported cooperation between certain Madinan Jews and the Makkans idolaters, see 4:51–52c.

In v. 81, their taking protectors among the disbelievers is presented as a result of their refusal to believe in God and the Prophet, and that which was sent down unto him, understood by some to mean their refusal to believe in Muhammad and the Quran (Ṭ). An alternate reading of v. 81 understands it to mean that had they believed in God and their own prophet, Moses, and that which was sent down unto him—that is, the Torah—they would not have sought out alliances among the disbelievers (R). Both readings, however, indicate that the rise of Muhammad as a prophet presented his Jewish contemporaries in Arabia with the choice of either allying with him, whose message both affirmed and challenged the Jews’ own religious understanding and practice, or allying with the disbelievers, that is, the idolaters, whose religious views were anathema to their own. That which they have sent forth for their souls refers to their deeds in this life for which they will be recompensed in the Hereafter; see 75:13c.

Thou wilt surely find the most hostile of men toward those who believe to be the Jews and those who ascribe partners unto God. And thou wilt find the nearest of them in affection toward those who believe to be those who say, “We are Christians.” That is because among them are
priests and monks, and because they are not arrogant.

And when they hear that which was sent down unto the Messenger, thou seest their eyes overflow with tears because of the truth they recognize. They say, “Our Lord, we believe, so inscribe us among the witnesses.

82–83 Although both Jews and Christians are privileged in the Quran as “People of the Book,” with whom the Muslims have a particularly close affinity (see v. 5, where Muslims can intermarry with and eat the food of those who have been given the Book), in v. 82 Jews and Christians are differentiated with regard to their attitude toward Muslim believers. Here the Jews are described as the most hostile to the believers, along with the idolaters (cf. 2:96, where both Jews and idolaters are said to be among the most covetous people for life), while the Christians are said to be the nearest . . . in affection to Muslim believers. Some indicate that the Jews’ hostility toward the believers made it particularly difficult for them to accept the truth of the Quran and the Prophet’s mission, while the Christians’ “nearness in affection” to the believers made it comparatively easier for them to accept the Quranic message (Z).

Although some commentators consider these statements to be absolute in nature and not limited to a particular historical situation (Th), such an interpretation is belied by the fact that at various points in Islamic history Muslims had better relations with the Jews than with Christians and Christian dynasties—the Crusades and the Spanish Reconquista would be two clear examples of this fact. It thus seems more plausible to contextualize this verse within the life of the Prophet and the early Muslim community. The Jews of Madinah and of the surrounding region presented a continual challenge to the Prophet’s authority as a prophet, and some of them reportedly colluded with the Makkan idolaters to harm the Prophet and his community. By contrast, certain Christian figures played positive and pivotal roles in the Prophet’s early life and mission. The Christian monk Bahijah first recognized Muhammad as a prophet; Waraqah, the Christian cousin of the Prophet’s wife Khadijah, identified the early revelations the Prophet received as being Divine in origin and consistent with the Christian scriptures he knew (see the introduction to Sūrah 96); and the Negus, the Christian king of Abyssinia, sheltered some of the Makkan Muslims from persecution by keeping them as guests in Abyssinia for years until they could later journey to Madinah. The Negus reportedly recognized the affinity between the Islamic teachings and his own religious beliefs as a Christian and thus refused to hand over the Muslim refugees to the idolatrous Quraysh, who demanded their return.
One early commentator claimed that this verse came in response to the Muslims’ first encounter with the Negus, when they were seeking shelter from the Makkani idolaters, although this does not make chronological sense, since this sūrah is widely considered to have been revealed in full in Madinah, and the original encounter with the Negus was during the Makkani period (IK). According to most commentators, however, the occasion for the revelation of these verses was the later visit of a delegation sent by the Negus to the Prophet in Madinah. When the Quran was recited to the Christian delegation, they began to weep and became believers (IK, T, Th, Z). Some accounts state that the delegation returned to the Negus and recited the Quran to him, whereupon he became a believer as well (T, Th). However, there is no historical evidence that the Negus later became Muslim, and the verse attributes positive attributes to Christians in general, not only to those who later embraced Islam (Th), since the Christians are described as nearest . . . in affection toward those who believe, rather than as Muslim believers themselves (see also 57:27, where the virtues of Christians are similarly praised). Some say that this refers to those Christians who heard the message brought by Muhammad and believed in his prophethood, although they continued to live according to the “sharīʿah (religious law) of Jesus” or the “way of the Gospel,” thus remaining “Christian” in a confessional sense (IK). Nonetheless, the report about the Negus does illustrate the good relations between the Prophet’s community and an important Christian dynasty in the region and suggests that a certain spiritual affinity between the Christians and the Muslims was a basis for their good relations.

In v. 82, the Christians’ nearness to the Muslim believers is attributed partly to the presence of priests and monks among them, suggesting that these men serve as exemplars of Christian virtue. Priests translates qassīsīn, which some commentators understand to mean the religious scholars (ʿulamāʾ) among the Christians (IK, Z), while a single report from the Prophetic Companion Salmān al-Fārsī—who was formerly Zoroastrian and then briefly Christian before embracing Islam—claims that the Prophet glossed qassīsīn as the “truthful (or saintly) ones” (ṣiddīqīn; IK). Despite the implied praise of Christian monks in this verse, the Quranic and Islamic attitude toward Christian monasticism is somewhat mixed. The Christian institution of monasticism has no parallel in the Islamic context and is in some ways inconsistent with the Islamic ideal of balancing worldly obligations with spiritual devotions, as exemplified by the Prophet himself, who explicitly discouraged his Companions from practicing the celibacy and excessive asceticism often associated with Christian monasticism. The Quran also blames certain monks for consuming the wealth of people falsely and turning from the way of God (9:34) and criticizes their followers for having taken them as lords apart from God (9:31). In 57:27, the Quran describes monasticism as something Christians invented, not something ordained for them (see 57:27c). See also 3:113, where it says in reference to the People of the Book, They are not all alike. Among the
People of the Book is an upright community who recite God’s signs in the watches of the night, while they prostrate.

Christians are also said to be “near” to Muslim believers, because they are not arrogant. Arrogance is a vice derided in all religious traditions, and the Quran repeatedly connects arrogance to the spiritual blindness that leads people to reject the signs of God, which include the prophets and their messages; see 2:87; 6:93; 7:75–76, 146; 10:75; 23:67; 31:7; 35:42–43; 39:59, 72; 41:15; 45:8, 31; 46:10; 63:5; 71:7. Arrogance is contrasted with the attitude of humility and gratitude that compels one to prostrate before God and to worship Him (cf. 4:172–73; 16:49; 21:19; 32:15; 40:60; 41:37–38). The assertion that Christians are not arrogant thus suggests both their inclination to worship and devote themselves to God and their receptivity to God’s signs and prophetic messages.

The latter is borne out in v. 83, where they are said to be particularly sensitive to the spiritual truth of the Quran, which they recognize and which causes their eyes to overflow with tears. For similar responses to the Quran among some of the People of the Book, see 17:107–9, where the Prophet is told to say of the Quran, Surely those who were given knowledge before it, when it is recited unto them, fall down prostrate on their faces. And they say, “Glory be to our Lord! The promise of our Lord is indeed fulfilled.” And they fall down on their faces, weeping, and it increases them in humility; and 28:52–53. Some commentators on this verse also mention the hadith, “Recite the Quran and weep, and if you do not weep [naturally], then cause yourself to weep” (Th). In v. 83, the Christian response to hearing the Quran is also to say we believe, that is, in Muhammad as a Divinely sent prophet (even if they remained Christians, confessionally, as discussed above) and in the Quran as the truth from God (Ṭ). Their plea inscribe us among the witnesses may mean that they wish to be counted either among those who recognize the truth and the Oneness of God or among the religious community of Muhammad specifically (R, Ṭ, Z).

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And how should we not believe in God and the truth that has come unto us, when we desire that our Lord should cause us to enter among the righteous people?”

The response of these Christians is to ask rhetorically, And how should we not believe in God—that is, in His Oneness—and the truth that has come unto us through His revelations (Ṭ), given that they desire to be in the company of the righteous in order to obtain the blessings of God (Z). The righteous people here may mean the Prophet and his Companions or simply those who affirm God’s
Oneness (T); and some commentators suggest that the Christians’ overall response here indicates a new awareness of the need to abandon their trinitarian beliefs (R). Their desire to be among the righteous people is also, for some, a sign of their belief, since disbelievers desire no such thing (Z).

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85 So God rewarded them for what they said with Gardens that have rivers running below, to abide therein, and that is the recompense of the virtuous.

As for those who disbelieved and denied Our signs—such shall be the inhabitants of Hellfire!

85–86 The image of Gardens with rivers running below as a reward for believers and the virtuous is found throughout the Quran (see 2:25c), as is the idea that disbelievers and those who deny God’s signs will be punished in Hellfire in the next life (see, e.g., 2:39; 5:10; 7:36; 22:51; 57:19; 64:10).

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87 O you who believe! Do not forbid the good things that God has made lawful unto you, and do not transgress. Surely God loves not transgressors.

88 Eat of that which God has provided you that is lawful and good, and reverence God, in Whom you are believers.

87–88 Earlier in this sūrah and elsewhere, the Quran clearly delineates lawful and unlawful foods; see 2:173; 5:3–5; 6:118–19, 145; 16:115. These stipulations are presented in a way that suggests that the limits on what can be consumed are rather few, and that in fact Muslims have a wide range of lawful foods available to them that they can eat and enjoy freely, as enjoined in v. 88 (cf. 2:168, 172; 16:114). In this vein, the Quran is critical of those who would forbid lawful things arbitrarily and without Divine warrant; see 6:138–45, 150–51; 7:32 (with regard to adornment in dress, rather than food); 16:116. God loves not the
transgressors is repeated in 2:190 and 7:55; and in 10:74 it is said that God sets a seal upon the hearts of the transgressors.

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89 God will not take you to task for that which is frivolous in your oaths, but He will take you to task for the oaths you have pledged in earnest. The expiation thereof is the feeding of ten indigent people with the equivalent of that which you feed your own family, or clothing them, or freeing a slave. And whosoever finds not [the means], let him fast for three days. That is the expiation for your oaths when you have sworn [them]. But keep your oaths. Thus does God make clear unto you His signs, that haply you may give thanks.

89 The Quran often speaks about the serious nature of oaths—that is, swearing on God’s Name or, according to some, on the Quran, since swearing on other things is not legitimate (Q)—and their misuse. Here that which is frivolous in your oaths relates most specifically to oaths taken arbitrarily to avoid certain lawful foods, following the injunctions in vv. 87–88 to not restrict the consumption of lawful things (Ṭ), but it has a more general application. This verse makes it clear that swearing to abstain from certain lawful things does not make them actually forbidden according to God (Q). Other verses mention the importance of being true to one’s oaths (3:77; 38:44) and warn against using them disingenuously or for harmful purposes (2:224; 16:91–92, 94). The Quran also criticizes disbelievers and hypocrites for either breaking their oaths or using them deceptively (5:53; 6:109; 16:38; 24:53; 35:42).

Here also, as discussed in 2:225c, God does not hold one accountable for oaths that are frivolous or made carelessly, but only for those that are pledged in earnest. Some commentators, however, maintain that it is these frivolous oaths that require the expiation mentioned in the latter part of the verse, and the meaning is that God will not hold one accountable for frivolous oaths for which one has made expiation (Ṭ). Others say that it is the oaths pledged in earnest that require expiation, particularly those made with sinful intent (Ṭ) or those made and not fulfilled (Ṭ). For oaths taken with the intent of deception or lying (kadhb), there is no expiation (Q, Ṭ).
Expiation by the feeding of ten indigent people is understood to mean providing for them in various ways. Some consider a combination of bread, dates, and oil to be what is required, but the best provision would be meat (Ṭ). Others consider a certain amount of wheat or other grain to be sufficient, while still others say it means feeding them lunch and supper (Ṭ). The expiation of clothing them may include giving them one or two articles of clothing, sometimes specifically including a head covering (Q, Ṭ). For both of these cases, some stipulate that the recipient must be truly poor and cannot be a dependent or close family member, for whom one is responsible in any case (Q). Some indicate that the recipient must be a free person, since a slave should be taken care of by his or her master; and there is some disagreement about whether the recipient must be a Muslim or not. The Ḥanafi school of law allows the food or clothing to be given to the poor among other religious communities (Q). Regarding giving charity to non-Muslims, see 2:272c; 60:8c. If one frees a slave for purposes of expiation, it must be a slave in good health, without physical deficiency (Ṭ). Some say the expiation of fasting must be for three consecutive days, although others maintain that this is not required, since it is not stipulated specifically in the verse, as it is, for example, in 58:4, which mandates that one fast two months consecutively for a certain kind of oath against one’s wife (Q, Ṭ). In either case, fasting is sufficient only as a means of expiation for those without the means of providing for the poor (Ṭ). For other passages where similar forms of expiation are mandated, see 2:184; 4:92; 5:95; 58:2–4.

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90 O you who believe! Wine, and gambling, and idols, and divining arrows are but a means of defilement, of Satan’s doing. So avoid it, that haply you may prosper.

91 Satan desires only to sow enmity and hatred among you through wine and gambling, and to turn you away from the remembrance of God, and from prayer. Will you, then, refrain?

90–91 This is the fourth and final passage in the chronological order of revelation relating to intoxicating drinks, and it enjoins their ultimate and complete prohibition. In 16:67, the image of fruits . . . from which you derive strong drink is presented as a sign of God’s generous provision for human beings. However, in
2:219 both wine and gambling are said to have some benefit, but also great sin. Then in 4:43 people are told to avoid prayer when in a state of drunkenness. In the present verses wine and gambling are included, along with idols and the pre-Islamic, pagan practice of using divining arrows to allot food and other goods, as among those things that bring spiritual impurity and should be completely avoided. Gambling translates maysir, a specific form of gambling popular in pre-Islamic Arabia (see 2:219c), although the verse is understood as applying to all forms of gambling, just as the prohibition on wine in these verses is understood as a prohibition on all intoxicants.

That the prohibition of wine (khamr), which technically refers to wine made from grapes, nonetheless extends to all intoxicating beverages was reportedly explained by ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb in a sermon in which he said, “Wine (khamr) is that which clouds (khāmara) the intellect,” indicating that the prohibition applies to any substance that, when consumed, clouds the mind (IK). Moreover, the ban on intoxicating beverages includes not only their consumption, but also their sale and any profit attained by it (IK).

Some considered the ban on gambling to extend to all games that squander people’s time fruitlessly, such as chess and backgammon (IK), although these latter were never banned in Islamic Law, and both have remained popular games among Muslims to the present day. In this verse, idols (anṣāb) is likely a reference to the idolatrous practice of sacrificing animals on stone altars (nuṣub), which is mentioned in v. 3 as a practice that made the meat unlawful to consume.

Some accounts report that the present verse was revealed after some of the Prophet’s Companions became drunk and began to fight with one another until one man was seriously injured (Ṭ). V. 91 thus indicates that wine and gambling should be avoided, because they are a means through which Satan may cause enmity and hatred among the believers and lead them to neglect remembrance of God and prayer. Intracommunal enmity and hatred are said elsewhere to be the fate of Christians (v. 14) and of Jews (v. 64) as a result of their forgetfulness or disobedience.

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Obey God and obey the Messenger, and be wary. But if you turn away, then know that only the clear proclamation is incumbent upon Our Messenger.

92 The combined injunction to obey God and obey the Messenger is found throughout the Quran (see 3:32, 132; 4:59; 8:1, 20, 46; 24:54; 33:33; 47:33; 58:13;
64:12; see also 7:156–57; 59:7), although in this context it is likely meant to encourage obedience specifically to the prohibitions listed in vv. 90–91 (R, Ṭ). This is one of several places where the Prophet is reminded that his only duty is to deliver the clear proclamation (cf. 3:20; 5:99; 13:40; 16:82; 29:18; 36:17; 42:48; 64:12). In the same vein, the Prophet is repeatedly reminded that he has no control over others’ reactions to the message that he delivers and thus is not responsible for those who remain unmoved by it (see, e.g., 4:80; 6:107; 42:6, 48).

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There is no blame upon those who believe and perform righteous deeds for that which they have eaten, so long as they are reverent, and believe, and perform righteous deeds, then are reverent and believe, and then are reverent and virtuous. And God loves the virtuous.

93 This verse was revealed in response to concerns among the Prophet’s Companions about those Muslims who had died before the revelation of the prohibition against drinking wine in vv. 90–91. As these verses banning wine were revealed late in the Madinan period, well after the battles of Badr and Uhud, many good Muslims who had drunk wine throughout their lives had already died. This verse assures the Companions that their fellow Muslims who had lived in obedience and virtue would not be blamed for that which they had eaten or consumed previous to the prohibition of these substances (Q, R, Ṭ, W).

A similar exemption for acts committed before their prohibition is found in 2:275, allowing those who practiced usury prior to its prohibition to keep what they had gained by it in the past. In the same vein, in 2:143 mention of the change of the qiblah direction is followed by the statement but God would not let your belief be in vain. This was reportedly a response to concern among the Companions about those believers who had died before the change (Q, R).

Given that the reason for the prohibition of wine and gambling in v. 91 is that it causes enmity and hatred among people and causes them to neglect prayer and the remembrance of God, some reportedly adduced the present verse to argue that the consumption of wine was permissible as long as one could do it without these negative results, or that what one consumed would not negatively affect those who were reverent, believed, performed righteous deeds, and were virtuous. This conclusion, however, is strongly contradicted by the Sunnah of the Prophet and the consensus of the community (ijmā) regarding the absolute nature of the prohibition of wine in vv. 90–91 and by the widely accepted interpretation of the present verse.
as relating specifically to those who drank wine but died prior to its prohibition (R).

The three things with which being _reverent_ is combined in this verse—believing, performing _righteous deeds_, and being _virtuous_—are essentially identical to the three major components of the Islamic religion as identified in the well-known _ḥadīth_ of Gabriel: proper belief (_īmān_); submission (_islām_) to the obligatory acts of worship, which is what most understand by _righteous deeds_ in this verse; and _virtue_ (_ibṣān_), which is “worshipping God as if you did see Him.” Some describe _righteous deeds_ in this verse as the observance of all obligatory religious acts and prohibitions, and _virtue_ as the performance of supererogatory acts of worship by which one seeks to draw nearer to God (Q, Ṭ), echoing another _ḥadīth qudsī_ (sacred _ḥadīth_), which states, “My servant brings nothing that I like more than the duties I have made incumbent upon him. Then My servant continues to draw nigh unto Me through supererogatory works until I love him . . .” Indeed, here and in several other places, God is said to “love” the _virtuous_ (2:195; 3:134, 148; 5:13), who, according to the _ḥadīth_ above, are those who seek to draw near to God through supererogatory works. Some commentators state that to have earned God’s Love in this way is the highest spiritual degree and the noblest station (R; also see the essay “The Quran and Sufism”). Other interpretations of the threefold mention of reverence (_taqwā_) in this verse are that it is meant for emphasis; that it refers to being mindful of what was prohibited in the past, what is prohibited at present, and what will be prohibited in the future (Q, R); or that it means having reverential fear of disbelief, of major sins, and of minor sins (Q, R).

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94 O you who believe! God will surely try you with something of the game you obtain with your hands and your spears, so that God may know the one who fears Him unseen. So whosoever transgresses after that, his shall be a painful punishment.

94 Since those in the state of pilgrim sanctity (_iḥrām_) are prohibited from hunting or slaughtering animals, the trial here is that pilgrims observe this prohibition fully, even avoiding small or helpless game that can be captured easily and have no way to escape (e.g., small birds and their eggs), and observing the prohibition even when out of sight of others (Q, Ṭ), thus demonstrating that they fear God even while unseen. The game obtained with _hands_ refers to small game, such as birds, and game obtained with _spears_ refers to larger animals (Q, Ṭ).
O you who believe! Slaughter not any game while you are in a state of pilgrim sanctity. And [for] the one among you who slaughters it intentionally, a recompense of cattle, the like of that which he slaughtered, as judged by two just men among you, as an offering brought to the Ka‘bah, or the expiation of feeding the indigent, or the equivalent of this in fasting, that he may taste the evil consequences of his affair. God has forgiven that which is past, but whosever relapses, God will take vengeance upon him, and God is Mighty, Possessor of Vengeance.

Here the ban on killing game while in a state of pilgrim sanctity is clearly stated and is understood as applying to those making either the major or the minor pilgrimage (ḥajj or ‘umrah). It is the actual taking of the life of a living animal that is prohibited, and thus if other pilgrims were to eat from the killed game, no repentance or expiation would be incumbent upon them (Q). One is permitted, however, to kill an animal, not for food, but because it is immediately threatening to human life, such as a lion, a wolf, or even a scorpion. This verse was reportedly revealed after one of the Madinan Helpers made the lesser pilgrimage (‘umrah) in 628, during which he killed a wild donkey (Q). The verse establishes that expiation is required from one who violates this ban intentionally—that is, not accidentally—or because he has simply forgotten that he is in a state of pilgrim sanctity.

Several means of expiation are listed, including feeding the indigent and fasting, which, as already mentioned, are also means of expiation for broken oaths, among other things (see 5:89 and commentary); but since this violation would take place in the context of the pilgrimage, the primary means of expiation is giving the equivalent, some say the monetary equivalent (Q, T), of the animal slaughtered as an offering brought to the Ka‘bah, that is, brought to the Makkan sanctuary (ḥaram) to be distributed among the needy there (JJ, Q). The two just men determine the worth or equivalent of the slaughtered animal, so that an equivalent offering can be made to the Ka‘bah. Their estimation of the worth of the slaughtered animal is also the basis of the extent of the other modes of expiation, should they be chosen, in that one must spend the equivalent amount in feeding the poor or fast one day for every standard measure (approximately half a liter) of food the slaughtered
animal is determined to have contained (Q). Because of the sacred character of Makkah, hunting of any kind is not permitted within its precincts, even for nonpilgrims, and its trees may also not be cut. Some reports and ḥādīth apply these prohibitions to the city of Madinah as well. No expiation is required for violating these principles, however, since the issue of expiation in the present verse relates only to those in pilgrim sanctity (iḥrām; Q). God has forgiven that which is past, that is, illicit killing of game done in the pre-Islamic period (jāhiliyyah; Ṭ). The description of God as Mighty, Possessor of Vengeance is also found in 3:4; 14:47; 39:37.

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The game of the sea and the food thereof is made lawful unto you—an enjoyment for you and for the travelers—but the game of the land is forbidden unto you so long as you remain in a state of pilgrim sanctity. And reverence God, unto Whom you shall be gathered.

96 The game of the sea that is licit for Muslims to eat under all circumstances refers to the meat of both freshwater and saltwater fish (Ṭ, Ṭū), but generally excluded predatory fish, such as sharks, and certain amphibious creatures, such as frogs, which the Mālikī school permitted, but others did not (Q). The Jaʿfarī Shiite school of law explicitly required the fish to have scales in order for it to be licit to eat, but also permitted shrimp; whereas some legal interpretations in the Ḥanafī school prohibited all shellfish. To be licit for pilgrims, however, most maintain that the meat must come from sea creatures that live only in the water, thus excluding amphibious creatures and certain shellfish that can also live on land (JJ, Q, Ṭ). The game of the sea refers to seafood that is caught through human effort, but the food thereof is understood by many to mean dead fish that have washed up on the shore, which can then be collected and eaten (Ṭ). The permissibility of eating fish that washes up dead on the shore is accepted by most as an exception to the prohibition against eating “carrion” (otherwise forbidden in 2:173; 5:3; 6:145; 16:115), because it comes from the sea, which, according to a ḥadīth, is a pure substance that can be used for ablutions (Q). Shiite commentators, however, generally argue that it is illicit under all circumstances to eat fish that have washed up dead on the shore (Ṭs, Ṭū); they maintain instead that the game of the sea refers to fish caught fresh while in a state of pilgrim sanctity, and that the food thereof refers separately to fish caught earlier, salted, and preserved to carry as provisions on a journey (Ṭs). Others derive a similar meaning from the description of seafood
as an enjoyment for you and for the travelers, indicating that for you and for the travelers refer, respectively, to the continuous abundance of fresh fish for those living or traveling near the sea or rivers and to the practice of salting and preserving fish to use as provisions for travelers on lengthy journeys on land (Ț, Ṭū).

There is some disagreement about the extent of the repeated prohibition but the game of the land is forbidden unto you. V. 95 indicates only that one may not kill game while in a state of pilgrim sanctity, but the present verse seems to prohibit eating from the game of the land in a general or absolute sense while one is making the pilgrimage, whether one has killed it oneself or not. On the basis of different interpretations of these two verses, early authorities disagreed as to whether it was only killing game that was prohibited for pilgrims, or whether pilgrims should avoid eating all meat from hunted game, both that killed by their own hand and that killed by another.

ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib considered eating the meat of hunted game of any kind to be discouraged (makrūh) for pilgrims, while ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān considered it lawful to eat the meat of game killed by others (Ț). Several reports say that the Prophet was given some meat from hunted game as a gift while he was in pilgrim sanctity and that he returned it. This may, however, be because he believed that the meat had been intentionally hunted and killed on his behalf—that is, to give to him as a gift—and a hadīth states that the meat of hunted game is licit for pilgrims to consume, so long as they neither hunted it themselves nor had it hunted or killed on their behalf (Ț).

The Mālikī, Shāfīʿī, and Ḥanbalī schools thus accept that pilgrims may eat the meat of hunted game, so long as it was not killed by the pilgrims themselves or killed on their behalf. The Ḥanafī school, however, reads v. 95 more literally to mean that the prohibition applies only to game hunted and killed by the pilgrims themselves, while the meat of game hunted even on his behalf is licit for them to eat (Q). A contrasting opinion attributed to ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, Ibn ʿAbbās, and several other prominent early authorities, however, holds that the general prohibition on hunted game found in the present verse means that the meat of any hunted game is illicit for pilgrims (Q, Ṭs); this is also the view of the Twelver Shiite Jaʿfārī school of law (Țs). Some early authorities indicate that one can eat the meat of game he has hunted and killed prior to entering the state of pilgrim sanctity (iḥrām), although others, including Ibn ʿAbbās, do not accept this distinction (Q); Shiite commentators also reject this distinction (Țū).

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God has made the Kaʿbah, the Sacred House, a support
for mankind, and the sacred month, and the offerings, and the garlands, this that you might know that God knows whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is on the earth, and that God is Knower of all things.

97 Although the pilgrimage rites and access to the Makkah sanctuary (ḥaram) and the Kaʿbah were made exclusive to Muslims in the last year of the Prophet’s life (see 5:2c) and non-Muslims can no longer go there, the present verse is one of several that suggest that the Makkah sanctuary has universal significance for all people, describing it as a support for mankind. For similar statements regarding the benefit of the sanctuary and its rites for mankind, see 2:125; 3:96; 22:25. Mankind translates al-nās, which is not necessarily universal in connotation and can mean simply “people.” Some commentators thus explain that the Kaʿbah is described as a support for mankind, because it served to order the affairs of the Arabs in the pre-Islamic period (Ṭ), for just as Makkah is a place of sanctuary for wild birds and animals, in that they cannot be hunted within its borders, so too did it serve as a sanctuary for human beings (R). Since even the idolatrous Arabs observed its sacred status and maintained a ban on violence in the Kaʿbah sanctuary, it served to hold back “the strong from the weak, the evil from the virtuous, and the oppressor from the oppressed” (Ṭ). Some interpret the description of the Kaʿbah as a support for mankind to mean a support for the Arabs, specifically, during the jāhiliyyah period, when there was no authority to maintain order in Arabia, and that it now serves as a support for Muslims by orienting their religious rites of pilgrimage and prayer (R, Ṭ). Al-Rāzī also understands the description of the Kaʿbah as a support for mankind to indicate that God has made the Kaʿbah in such a way that human beings have a natural awareness of its majesty and an inherent desire to go toward it (R).

In this verse, the sacred month, the offerings, and the garlands are mentioned, along with the Kaʿbah itself, as a support for mankind. The sacred month may refer specifically to the month of Dhuʾl-Ḥijjah (Z), when the pilgrimage was and is still performed, or to the four sacred months collectively (see 5:2c), in which travelers were safe from harm in pre-Islamic Arabia (R, Z); the offerings refer to sacrificial animals destined for the sanctuary who could not be harmed; and the garlands refer to ornamental wreaths the pre-Islamic Arabs would put around the necks of the sacrificial animals, so others would know their status and not harm or impede them as they were being led to the Kaʿbah; see 5:2 and commentary.

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Know that God is severe in retribution, and that God is Forgiving, Merciful.

The description of God in this verse as being severe in retribution (shadīd al-ʿiqāb) comes at the end of a series of prohibitions related to the pilgrimage, and the same phrase is found at the end of v. 2, which similarly contains commands and prohibitions related to the pilgrimage. It is also found in 3:11; 40:22; 59:4, 7. The description of God as both severe in retribution and Forgiving and Merciful (a pairing similar to that found in 13:6 and 40:3) reflects the widely held principle that a true believer is always suspended between fear of God’s Wrath and hope in His Mercy. In this vein, some quote a saying, “Were the fear of a believer weighed against his hope, they would be equal” (R). The fact that the verse concludes with the mention of God’s merciful and forgiving qualities is understood by some to mean that these qualities predominate in the Divine Nature (R), as in a famous ḥadīth qudsī (sacred ḥadīth), “My Mercy takes precedence over My Wrath.”

Only the proclamation is incumbent upon the Messenger. And God knows what you disclose and what you conceal.

See 5:92c, which also discusses the reminder to the Prophet that his only responsibility is to deliver the clear proclamation. God’s Knowledge of the unseen is repeatedly mentioned in different ways throughout the Quran. His Knowledge of what human beings disclose and hide of their own thoughts and nature is also mentioned specifically in 2:33; 11:5; 14:38; 16:19, 23; 24:29; 27:25, 74; 28:69; 33:54; 36:76; 60:1; 64:4.

Say, “The good and the wicked are not equal, though the abundance of the wicked may impress you.” So reverence God, O possessors of intellect, that you may prosper.
This is one of many places where the Quran asserts the spiritual and qualitative inequality of human beings in a variety of ways. See, for example, 9:19; 11:23–24; 16:76; 35:19; 39:29; 57:10; 59:20; and especially 39:9: What of one who is devoutly obedient during the watches of the night, prostrating and standing [in prayer], wary of the Hereafter and hoping for the Mercy of his Lord [...]? Say, “Are those who know and those who do not know equal? Only possessors of intellect reflect.” In the present verse, the wicked are compared to the good, and although the wicked may exist in great quantity, it is understood that the good surpass the wicked in spiritual quality. With regard to the abundance of the wicked, a ḥadīth says, “Mankind is like a hundred camels, among whom you can scarcely find one to ride” (Aj). According to some, the comparison between the wicked and the good may refer to wicked or good things—that is, those that are licit and illicit—rather than to people (Ṭṣ, Ṭū).

The phrase possessors of intellect (ūli’l-albāb or ālul-albāb in other contexts) is found throughout the Quran (see, e.g., 2:269; 3:7, 190; 12:111; 13:19; 14:52; 38:29, 43; 39:9, 18, 21; 40:54) and, as in the present verse, they are directly addressed by the Quran in several places; see 2:179, 197; 65:10. Intellect translates albāb, which has the primary meaning of “pith” or “kernel,” denoting the pure inner essence of something, and the secondary meaning of pure intellect or heart, insofar as these represent the purest spiritual essence of the human soul (Iṣ). Such people may also be said, more literally, to possess knowledge of the inner essence of things, which must be discerned with the intellect rather than reason or the senses. Ibn ʿAjībah glosses ālul-albāb here as “possessors of pure hearts,” who “avoid the wicked, even if they are many, and who betake themselves to the good, even if they are few.” In this sense, “intellect” is very different from “reason” or “rationality,” in that intellect represents a faculty for the attainment of unitive knowledge directly connected to God through which one acquires knowledge of essential realities, whereas reason is the human faculty of discernment that arrives at knowledge through a logical, analytical, and dialectical process that is dualistic in its approach.

O you who believe! Ask not about things which, if they were disclosed to you, would trouble you. And if you ask about them while the Quran is being sent down, they will be disclosed to you. God has pardoned this, and God is Forgiving, Clement.
A people before you asked about these things, then came to be disbelievers therein.

101–2 The most widely attested account about the revelation of these verses reports that they came in response to a man who, when the Prophet announced that the ḥajj was incumbent upon believers, asked if this meant they were required to make the ḥajj every year. The Prophet ignored his question three times before responding, “No. But if I had said yes, it would have been obligatory for you!” (Q, Ṭ, W, Z). In another version of the Prophet’s response, the Prophet added, “Keep silent regarding those things about which I am silent, for those who came before you were only destroyed by their questions and by disputing with their prophets” (Ṭ), echoing the warning in v. 102. The Prophet’s answer suggests that there may be an intentional leniency or mercy in the ambiguities of certain religious commands. If one pushes to have them clarified, it might make the obligation more difficult or too difficult. Thus people should refrain from asking questions of this nature, for if the matter were disclosed to them, it would trouble them (Ṭ).

Other reports indicate that these verses were revealed in response to those who would ask the Prophet disingenuous questions in order to test or belittle him. Such people would ask him about things that would naturally be unknown to him, such as who their father was or where their lost camel had wandered (Q, Ṭ, W), the answers to which, especially in the first case, might reveal troubling information best left unknown (R). Another report indicates that these verses were revealed after some people asked the Prophet about the idolatrous practices of baḥīrah, sāʾibah, waṣīlah, and ḥām, which are mentioned and refuted in v. 103 (Q, Ṭ). The general warning in v. 101 about asking questions whose answers might trouble you would be applicable to all three types of questions mentioned above and can be read in connection to the statement in v. 92 that only the clear proclamation is incumbent upon Our Messenger (R). Thus one should not question the Prophet about religious obligations beyond what has been revealed to him or about matters, like lost camels, that do not pertain to religious guidance and about which the Prophet has not been given any special knowledge. The Quran repeatedly states that neither the Prophet Muhammad nor the earlier prophets had access to knowledge of the unseen beyond what had been revealed to them (see, e.g., 3:44; 6:50; 7:188; 11:31).

In a more general way, some indicate that these verses are meant to discourage excessive questioning of any type and connect them to a ḥadīth in which it is said that one of the three things God dislikes among people is “too much questioning” (kathrat al-suʾāl; Q). Nonetheless, the present verses clearly address inappropriate questioning, which is likely to lead to troubling answers, and some commentators are careful to note that appropriate questions, asked in a genuine
search for religious guidance, are not discouraged (Q, R).

And if you ask about them while the Quran is being sent down—that is, while the Prophet was still alive and able to receive revelation (JJ, Z)—they will be disclosed to you. This may indicate, by way of warning, that those who asked about such matters while the Quran was still in the process of being revealed were in particular danger of receiving a more difficult command as a result of their questions, since their questions would certainly be answered (JJ, Z). However, this statement can also be read as a license to ask legitimate questions regarding what has already been revealed, for example, about what a particular verse of the Quran means. If such questions are asked while the Prophet is still alive to receive revelation, the answers will be disclosed (R). What God has pardoned may be excessive or inappropriate questioning in the past (Q, R, Ṭ, Z) or perhaps the past sins that might be revealed by the answers the Prophet gives to certain inappropriate questions (R).

V. 102 mentions a people before you who asked similar questions, leading them to become disbelievers. There are several examples in the Quran of earlier prophets being questioned disingenuously or inappropriately by their followers. See, for example, 4:153, where the Israelites tell Moses, *Show us God openly,* and are then seized by a thunderbolt; 2:246–47, where the Israelites ask for a king, and when God appoints Saul for them, they proceed to question his qualifications; and 2:67–71, where Moses relates to the Israelites God’s command to slaughter a cow, and they respond by asking a series of questions about the exact nature of the cow to be slaughtered in a manner that suggests an inappropriate distrust of Moses. Like the question about the ḥajj mentioned above, their questioning makes a given command even more difficult to fulfill. Some commentators connect the reference to earlier communities who had asked inappropriate questions of their prophets to the people who asked the Prophet ṣaliḥ for a sign to prove that he was truly a prophet. When he brought them a sacred she-camel as a sign, his people hamstrung her and so brought destructive punishment down upon themselves (see 7:73–79; 11:61–68; 26:141–58; Q, Ṭ, Z). Some commentators also suggest that one example of previous peoples asking inappropriate questions of their prophets is the followers of Jesus who asked for a table spread with food (*māʾidah*) to be sent down in vv. 112–15 (Q, Ṭ, Z). The Quran does not relate this account in as critical a tone as it does the story of the Israelites and the cow, but in v. 115 God does warn that any who disbelieve after He had fulfilled their request would receive an unprecedented punishment.

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God has not established *baḥīrah,* or *sāʾibah,* or *waṣīlah,*
or ḥām. But those who disbelieve fabricate lies against God, and most of them do not understand.

103 The four Arabic terms in this verse refer to particular kinds of camels that, for various reasons, the Arabian idolaters used to consider sacred and dedicate to the gods. Such camels could not be ridden or milked for human consumption, but had to be allowed to wander and graze freely. The commentators differ on the precise nature of each of these kinds of camels, and the distinctions they mention for these different consecrated camels tend to overlap. Some report that bahīrah referred to a female camel who had borne five offspring (Q), the fifth of which, according to some, had to be a male (R). Sāʾibah generally referred to a female camel that was consecrated to the gods voluntarily by its owner as a supplicatory offering for overcoming illness, for protection on a journey, or as a means of giving thanks for some good fortune (R). Others report that sāʾibah may have referred to a slave that was freed completely, one for whom all ties to the former master had been severed (R). The wasīlah was either a female camel who had given birth to many female offspring (JJ)—particularly valuable for their milk—or a female camel who had given birth to a male and a female offspring (R). Ḥām (the only reference to a male camel among the four) refers to the male camel who had sired many offspring (JJ) or whose offspring had sired another generation of offspring (R) and so was allowed to graze freely and could not be ridden or made to carry any burden (R).

These sacred camels would often be marked by slit ears, so that people who came upon them would be aware of their sacred status and not disturb them. See 4:119, where Satan vows to lead people astray by, among other things, commanding them to slit the ears of their livestock. See also 6:136–39, 143–45, and 10:59, which criticize the idolatrous Arabs for arbitrarily making certain kinds of livestock sacred or consecrating them to their gods. These practices are reported to be some of the first ways in which the pre-Islamic Arabs deviated from the monotheistic religion of Abraham (Ṭ). Besides being idolatrous in orientation, these practices also violate the Quran’s repeated objection to arbitrarily restricting the enjoyment or consumption of the good things that God has provided for human beings (see 5:87–88 and commentary). Moreover, when they falsely represent practices they have devised themselves as either requirements of Divine Law or means of approaching the Divine (IK), they fabricate lies against God, an enormous sin often connected in the Quran with the religious innovations of previous religious communities; see 3:24, 93–94; 6:21, 93, 137–40, 144; 7:37, 152; 10:17–18, 59–60, 69; 16:56, 116.

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And when it is said unto them, “Come unto that which God has sent down, and unto the Messenger,” they say, “Sufficient for us is that which we have found our fathers practicing.” What! Even if their fathers knew naught and were not rightly guided?

104 See 2:170, for a nearly identical verse. Following upon v. 103, which repudiated the traditional idolatrous practices of making certain camels arbitrarily “sacred,” the present verse suggests that such practices cannot continue to be justified by the idolaters’ claims to be following the traditions of their fathers. Throughout the Quran many peoples are said to have rejected the messages of the prophets sent to them, because they were reluctant to abandon their existing idolatrous and immoral practices. Such people often invoke their fathers and their fathers’ corrupt religious guidance as a basis for their rejection of the prophet. Some manifest outrage at the prophet’s demand that they abandon the traditions of their fathers; see, for example, 34:43: And when Our signs are recited unto them as clear proofs, they say, “This is naught but a man who desires to turn you from that which your fathers used to worship”; as well as 2:170; 7:70; 10:78; 11:62, 87; 14:10; 23:24; 28:36; 31:21; 43:22–23. Elsewhere, disbelievers invoke their fathers’ teachings as an excuse for their own idolatrous or immoral practices, in an ineffective attempt at deflecting blame from themselves; see 7:28: When they commit an indecency, they say, “We found our fathers practicing it, and God has commanded us thus.” Say, “Truly God commands not indecency. Do you say of God that which you know not?” See also 21:51–54 and 26:69–76, where Abraham upbraids his people for uncritically following the idolatrous teachings of their fathers.

This general theme, which is articulated in many of the prophetic narratives in the Quran, serves as a strong basis for the resistance to the practice of “blind obedience” (taqlīd), without inquiry, to other people purported to be authorities in matters of religious doctrine (R). At the very least, this verse suggests that one is responsible for finding worthy sources of instruction and guidance in religion (R, Z), for when the disbelievers in this verse plead their loyalty to their fathers’ traditions, they are chastised for following those who knew naught and were not rightly guided. Regardless of inherited customs, the Quran makes it clear that individuals are personally morally responsible for their own religious choices on the basis of what Islamic tradition considers an inherent awareness of the Being and Oneness of God, to which the Quran says they testified in a pretemporal covenant, as related in 7:172.
O you who believe! You have charge of your own souls. He who is astray cannot harm you if you are rightly guided. Unto God shall be your return all together, and He shall inform you of what you used to do.

If the previous verse rejected the claim of the disbelievers who refused prophetic guidance on the basis that they were following the practices of their fathers, the present verse can be read, in one sense, as asserting that all human beings have responsibility for the fate of their own souls. You have charge of your own souls could also be read in the imperative: “Take charge of your own souls!” which some commentators see as an admonition to take care to preserve one’s own soul from religious disobedience (Q, R). He who is astray may be a reference to the “fathers” from whom the disbelievers in the previous verse claim to take their religious guidance. It may also be a reference to other disbelievers, or perhaps even to Satan, who is said in several verses to possess no independent authority over people’s souls or moral choices (see 14:22; 15:42; 16:99; 17:65; 34:21).

Most commentators, however, interpret this verse to mean that ultimately one is morally responsible for only oneself. The commentators’ primary concern with this verse was the extent to which the idea that one was morally responsible for only oneself would compromise the importance of enjoining right and forbidding wrong, established as a principle for believers and the believing community in other verses of the Quran (3:104, 110, 114; 7:157, 199; 9:67) and considered one of the religious obligations of all Muslims, individually and collectively (R, Ṭ). Most commentators maintain, therefore, that this verse does not in any way nullify the obligation to enjoin right and forbid wrong, but simply indicates that if one’s calls nevertheless go unheeded, one bears no moral responsibility for those who refused to accept the admonition (R, Ṭ, Z). Others interpret you have charge of your own souls to mean “you have charge over your own,” meaning that you have a moral responsibility to guide the members of your own religious community, but not those outside it (R). Some say that the intended meaning is that one should not be grieved by the recalcitrance of others (R) in the face of moral admonition, since even the Prophet is told that he has no control over whether the Divine message he brings will be accepted or not (see 5:92c; 5:99c).

A number of statements attributed to the Prophet’s Companions asserted that the time for the message of this verse to take effect had not yet been realized. They suggested that it was only in the distant, perhaps apocalyptic, future, when people will be widely impervious to religious guidance and the world will be filled with
moral enormities, that people would become responsible for simply protecting their own souls from moral destruction (Ṭ, Th). This represents a rather weak view, however, since it would restrict the relevance of the verse to circumstances in the distant future.

The idea that God will inform people in the Hereafter about what they used to do, their own past actions and things over which there were religious differences, is mentioned in several other places in the Quran (5:48; 6:60; 9:94, 105; 10:23; 29:8; 31:15; 39:7; 62:8).

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O you who believe! The witness between you, when death approaches one of you, at the time of the bequest, shall be two just men among you, or two from among other than yourselves if you are traveling upon the earth when death befalls you. Detain the two of them after the prayer, and let them both swear by God, if you doubt [them], “We will not sell it for any price, though he were a kinsman, nor will we conceal the witness of God, for then we would surely be among the sinners.”

In Islamic Law, one may bequeath up to one-third of one’s wealth prior to one’s death to anyone who is not already entitled to an ordained share of inheritance as stipulated in 4:11–12. The Quran initially enjoined leaving bequests in a general way for parents and other relatives (2:180) and for widows (2:240). After the revelation of 4:11–12, which assigned specific shares of the inheritance to parents, widows, and other close relatives, most Islamic legal schools considered the stipulated heirs to be ineligible to receive such bequests (see 2:180c for a fuller discussion). One of the stipulations of 4:11–12, however, is that any known bequests made by the deceased to others must be rendered before the remainder of the property is divided among the legal heirs.

Such bequests must be made in the presence of two witnesses, which is also true of other transactions of property; see 2:282, regarding the contracting of debt, and 4:6, which concerns giving orphans their property when they reach maturity. In the present verse, the witness between you, or according to another reading, “the witness to what is with you,” when death approaches must be two just men among you, which is widely interpreted to mean two men from among the community of
Muslims (Ṭ). Two from among other than yourselves could thus refer to non-Muslims who might be called upon to witness the bequest when one is traveling upon the earth, presumably among non-Muslims (Q, Ṭ). Some say that the non-Muslim witnesses may be from any religious community, since the verse is not specific on this issue, but others say that they should be from the Jewish, Christian, or Zoroastrian communities, and testimony from those belonging to these three communities has been legally accepted in Islamic courts (Ṭ). In Islamic courts in India, Hindu testimony was also accepted in some cases. A minority interpret two just men among you to mean two men from among one’s neighbors, in which case, two from among other than yourselves would refer to those outside one’s immediate community (Q, Ṭ). Based upon the gender of the adjective just (dhawāʿ adl), the verse is understood as requiring two male witnesses (Q).

The present verse was reportedly revealed after an incident involving a Muslim man who became ill and died while traveling with two Christian companions. The young man entrusted his possessions to his companions to give to his family. Upon their return, the companions gave the man’s possessions to his family, and the Prophet made them swear that they had held nothing back. Later, however, it was discovered that they had kept for themselves a valuable silver drinking vessel. When one of the deceased’s heirs saw the cup, he recognized it as one of the deceased man’s possessions and testified that it should have been part of the bequest (Ṭ, Z).

Commentators generally indicate that it is necessary for the witnesses to be “detained” or made to swear an oath before God only in cases where their faithfulness is suspect (Q, Ṭ). Detaining them after the prayer (ṣalāḥ) is widely understood to mean after the Islamic late afternoon (ʿāṣr) prayer, as it was reported that the Prophet’s practice was to exact oaths from people at this time specifically (Ṭ). Some maintain, however, that the prayer does not necessarily refer to the Islamic canonical prayer, since the witnesses might be non-Muslims, in which case they should be detained after their own prayer (Ṭ), presumably because they are more likely to be faithful witnesses and to fear making a false oath before God after having completed their prayers. The oath to not sell it for any price is a promise that they will not profit from their witnessing in any way (Ṭ). This verse is also evidence that solemn oaths should be sworn by God, an idea supported by a hadith, “Whosoever would swear an oath, let him swear by God or be silent” (Q). The foundational legal scholar al-Shāfiʿī, however, also permitted swearing upon a written copy of the Quran (Q). Regarding the significance of oath taking, see v. 89.

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But if it is discovered that the two of them are guilty of
sin, then two others shall stand in their place, from those most entitled as claimants, and swear by God, “Indeed, our witness is truer than their witness, and we have not transgressed, for then we would surely be among the wrongdoers.”

107 But if it is discovered that the two of them are guilty of sin—that is, of betraying the trust they specifically undertook as witnesses to the bequest of the deceased (Q, T)—then two others will stand in their place. These two others will be among those most entitled as claimants to the bequest of the deceased (T), whose rights have therefore been violated by the unfaithful witnesses (T). This phrase may also be rendered “those nearest to it,” meaning both those most entitled to receive the bequest and those nearest to the affairs of the deceased and thus having greater knowledge of his situation (Z). These two others must take an oath to their own truthfulness because, as claimants to the bequest, they are not disinterested witnesses (T). As part of this oath they swear that they have not transgressed, that is, exceeded the limits in the testimony they have given regarding the bequest (T).

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Thus it is more likely that they will bear true witness, or fear that their oaths will be countered by oaths thereafter. And reverence God and listen. God guides not iniquitous people.

108 The various procedures for assuring the truthful witness of those present at a bequest in vv. 106–7 are intended to make it likely that the witnesses will execute the bequest faithfully and to increase public trust in such matters. Some suggest that the verses are intended to impress upon all people the solemnity and seriousness of taking oaths or serving as witnesses to such bequests (Q). As such, vv. 106–8 are among a number of passages that insist upon the religious duty of truthful witness (4:135; 5:8) and of faithfully fulfilling matters with which one has been entrusted (2:283; 4:58; 8:27; 23:8–11; 70:32–35).

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The day when God will gather the messengers and say, “What response did you receive?” they will say, “We have no knowledge. Truly it is Thou Who knowest best the things unseen.”

This verse is meant as a warning about the day when God will gather the messengers and can be understood to mean “Beware of the day when . . .” Although no explicit warning is issued, some indicate that the verse follows upon the admonition in v. 108, reverence God and listen (R, Ţ, Ţs, Z), or upon the last sentence of v. 108, so that it reads, God guides not the iniquitous people [on] the day when God will gather the messengers (R, Z). God’s question to the prophets, What response did you receive? is meant as a rebuke to their people (Bḍ, Ţ). The question is addressed to the prophets, because they are the leaders of their communities (Th). The commentators seek to explain why the prophets, when questioned by God about this matter, claim that they have no knowledge of it, when, as witnesses for and against their own communities, they surely know the answer. Some commentators suggest that even the prophets will be too overwhelmed with awe at the terrors of that Day to respond immediately, but will later regain their composure and proceed to testify to the actions of their respective communities (Ţ, Z). This explanation is hard to reconcile, however, with other verses that state that the believers—and the prophets are surely among them—will have no fear on that Day (2:62; 21:103; R, Ţs).

Considering the prophets’ further response, Thou . . . knowest best the things unseen (cf. v. 116), they may simply be indicating that they are not aware of what their communities have done after they themselves have passed away or of the secret intentions of their followers (R, Ţ, Z). Yet, this explanation also seems inconsistent with the Quranic idea that the prophets will testify against their communities on the Day of Judgment (2:143; 4:69; 22:78; 57:19). The prophets’ statement that they have no knowledge is probably best understood as the prophets’ expression of humility before God’s Knowledge (Z), meaning either “we have no knowledge save what Thou hast taught us,” which is identical to the response the angels give to God in 2:32, or “we have no knowledge save that Thy Knowledge thereof is the same or greater” (Bḍ, R, Ţ). In the same vein, it may also be the prophets’ acknowledgment that, although they know the outward aspects of people’s actions, God alone knows their secrets (R). Thus the prophets, although aware of the deeds of their communities, prefer to entrust the matter of their judgment to God (Z).
Then God will say, “O Jesus son of Mary! Remember My Blessing upon thee, and upon thy mother, when I strengthened thee with the Holy Spirit, that thou mightest speak to people in the cradle and in maturity; and when I taught thee the Book, Wisdom, the Torah, and the Gospel; and how thou wouldst create out of clay the shape of a bird, by My Leave, and thou wouldst breathe into it, and it would become a bird, by My Leave; and thou wouldst heal the blind and the leper, by My Leave; and thou wouldst bring forth the dead, by My Leave; and how I restrained the Children of Israel from thee, when thou didst bring them clear proofs, and those who disbelieved among them said, ‘This is naught but manifest sorcery.’

110 This verse continues in the context of God speaking to the prophets on the Day of Judgment, but here and for nearly the remainder of the sūrah God addresses Jesus specifically regarding his mission and the actions of his followers. The present verse rehearses many of the extraordinary qualities attributed to Jesus throughout the Quran. He is strengthened . . . with the Holy Spirit (see 2:87, 253; for the role the Spirit plays in his creation, see also 4:171; 19:17; 21:91; 66:12). The Holy Spirit (rūḥ al-qudus) is widely understood in its Quranic context and in the commentary tradition to be a reference to the Archangel Gabriel, the angel of revelation (Ṭ; see also 16:102; 17:85; 26:193; 42:52; 97:4). It is also identified with the Spirit (al-Rūḥ) as such, which the Quran describes as being from the Command of my Lord (17:85). Given the grammatical form of rūḥ al-qudus, it could also be rendered “Spirit of the holy” or even “Spirit of God,” since it is related to the Divine Name al-Quddūs (the Holy; see 59:23; R); see also 2:87c. Given the connection between Jesus and the Spirit, his prophetic title is Rūḥ Allāh, or “Spirit of God,” which can therefore also be used as a proper name in Islam.

In this verse Jesus is also described as a bearer of revelation in a manner similar to that used to describe other prophets: he has been taught the Book and Wisdom (3:81; 4:54, 113), a phrase used to refer to the scriptures of the prophets and to the prophets’ knowledge of their meaning, respectively (Ṭ; see also 2:129, 151, 231; 3:164; 62:2); and he has been given clear proofs, also said of Jesus in 2:87, 253, and used as a general term for Divine Revelation in all its forms throughout the Quran. Jesus’ ability to speak to people in the cradle, meaning his
ability to speak to people while he himself was an infant, also found in 3:46 and 19:29–30, is an exclusively Quranic attribute not found in the Bible. His creating live birds out of clay birds, healing the blind and the leper, and raising the dead are likewise recounted in 3:49 (for blind and leper, see 3:49c). These last three miraculous powers attributed to Jesus are extraordinary in that they suggest powers usually reserved for God: God is the one who heals in 26:8; He is the raiser of the dead throughout the Quran; and the creation of birds from clay and bringing them to life by breathing upon them is exactly parallel to God’s creation of the human being (15:26–29; 32:7–9; 38:71–72). The verse repeatedly makes clear, however, that all these powers are done by God’s leave (by My Leave) and so are ultimately His. Jesus’ ability to heal and power to raise the dead are also found in the canonical Gospels, and a similar account of Jesus’ creating birds from clay is given in the noncanonical Infancy Gospel of Thomas.

That God restrained the Children of Israel from him is understood by most commentators to mean that He thwarted their attempt to slay him, since the Quran asserts that they did not slay him; nor did they crucify him (see 4:157 and commentary). Jesus’ miracles are dismissed by some as manifest sorcery (see also 61:6). Similar accusations of sorcery were made against Muhammad (6:7; 10:2; 21:3; 43:30; 46:7; 74:24; also 54:2, regarding the splitting of the moon), Moses (10:76; 20:57; 27:13; 28:36), and the messengers of God in general (11:7; 34:43; 37:15).

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And when I inspired the apostles to believe in Me and in My messenger, they said, ‘We believe. Bear witness that we are submitters.’”

111–15 These verses recount the incident in which Jesus’ apostles request, and God sends down from Heaven, a table spread with food (al-māʾidah—from which this sūrah takes its name).

111 Cf. 3:52–53, where Jesus’ apostles also testify that they are muslims—that is, submitters unto God—although their assertion there is followed by the statement in 3:54 that they plotted. In this verse, God speaks in the first person to state that He inspired the apostles to believe, using a verb for “inspired” that is related to ṭabī, which usually denotes prophetic revelation. In this context, it is glossed as a “casting into the heart,” indicating a less direct or verbatim form of inspiration than what the prophets received (IK, Ṭ). From a theological perspective, the fact that the apostles’ “belief” precedes their submitting unto God as muslims indicates that inward belief should precede the outward conforming of
one’s actions to the Divine Will (R), an idea reflected in the Islamic theological formulation that faith consists of “knowledge in the heart, affirmation with the tongue, and proper action with the limbs.”

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When the apostles said, “O Jesus son of Mary! Is thy Lord able to send down to us from Heaven a table spread with food?” He said, “Reverence God, if you are believers.”

They said, “We desire to eat from it, so that our hearts may be at peace, and we may know that thou hast spoken truthfully unto us, and we may be among the witnesses thereto.”

112–13 The apostles’ question seems to suggest a certain doubt in God’s Omnipotence, since they ask whether God is able to send down the table spread with food. They may have desired such food for either simple nourishment or the spiritual blessing of consuming heavenly food (Āl), or both. Yet it is the apparent disrespect or lack of appreciation of God’s Power that their question suggests that leads Jesus to respond, with a tone of rebuke according to some, Reverence God, if you are believers. Reverence God (ittaqū’Llāh) also carries the meaning “Have fear of God” (Ṭ). Because their request comes shortly after the recounting of Jesus’ many miraculous abilities in v. 110, it may suggest a certain ingratitude for the signs they have already been given (R). Some early commentators read the verse to indicate that the apostles were asking Jesus if he was able to beseech God on their behalf to send down the table, rather than questioning God’s ability to do so (Ṭ). In the latter case, Jesus’ response was meant as a rebuke, since their asking for a sign might indicate their lack of faith or certainty in Jesus’ status as a prophet (Ṭ, Z), despite their claim of faith in v. 111. The Quran contains several other accounts of people requesting a sign from their prophets due to lack of faith (see 4:153; 6:37, 109; 7:203c).

The apostles’ response to Jesus’ rebuke is to express their desire that their hearts may be at peace and that they might have direct confirmation of Jesus’ prophetic message. This response suggests that the apostles’ motivations are similar to those of Abraham in 2:260: And when Abraham said, “My Lord, show me how Thou givest life to the dead,” He said, “Dost thou not believe?” He said, “Yea, indeed, but so that my heart may be at peace” (R). In fact, Jesus’ words
Reverence God, if you are believers may not be meant as a rebuke at all, but rather as a reminder that an attitude of reverence would lead God to fulfill their request (R). The apostles’ promise to be witnesses thereto means either that they will be witnesses to this miracle for those not present or that they will be witnesses to the truth of God’s Oneness and Power and to Jesus’ prophethood (T, Z).

According to one commentator, the apostles’ request followed a thirty-day fast, after which Jesus had advised them that God would grant them any need they might have (Th), thus creating a parallel between this account and the Islamic ʿĪd al-fitr (the Feast of Breaking Fast), which follows the month-long fast of Ramadan (note that when Jesus makes the request of God in v. 114, he indicates that it should be a "feast," ʿīd, for them). Although this story has no direct parallel in the Gospel accounts, and some consider it something known only to Muslims through the Quran (IK), it may be linked with the Gospel account of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (Matthew 14:13–21; Mark 6:32–44) or more indirectly with the story of the Last Supper, and by extension to the “heavenly food” of the Christian Eucharist, which is based on it. Insofar as it is a story of faith and miracles, it may also be compared to Gospel accounts of Jesus rebuking his apostles for lacking faith in God’s ability to provide food for them (see Matthew 6:31; 16:5–10; Luke 12:28–29) or asserting that the lack of faith prevents God’s miraculous intervention (Matthew 17:15–21).

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Jesus son of Mary said, “O God, our Lord! Send down unto us a table from Heaven spread with food, to be a feast for us—for the first of us and the last of us—and a sign from Thee, and provide for us, for Thou art the best of providers.”

God said, “I shall indeed send it down unto you. But whosoever among you disbelieves thereafter, I shall surely punish him with a punishment wherewith I have not punished any other in all the worlds.”

Jesus’ prayer that the table from Heaven spread with food be a feast (ʿīd) for us—for the first of us and the last of us may simply be a request that God send down sufficient food for all Jesus’ followers (T, Z). As such, it has some
resonance with the Gospel account of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (mentioned in 5:112–13c). However, Jesus’ wish that the Heaven-sent table be a feast, using ʿīd, which connotes both “returning” and “joy” and is used to denote Muslim religious holidays, may also indicate that he and his followers, present and future, would observe the day of this event as a sacred feast (R, Ṭ, Z). Some say that this perpetually observed feast day is Sunday (Z), which would support the suggestion that this Quranic account is a reference to the Eucharist.

Varying reports indicate that the Heaven-sent food consisted of fish (Ṭ, Z), of meat and bread, of paradisal fruits, or of all kinds of food except meat (Ṭ). According to one report, it came down as a red cloth spread with food, between two clouds, whereupon Jesus prayed, “O God, make me one of the thankful. O God make this [table] a mercy, and make it not a punishment” (R, Z). Some commentators, however, maintain that no table . . . spread with food was sent down at all, and the story is simply a parable told to discourage people from asking for such things in the future (R, Ṭ); some report that the apostles withdrew their request and repented after hearing God’s warning in v. 115 that whoever disbelieves after He sent down the table will be punished with a punishment such as none have seen before (IK, Ṭ, Z). However, given God’s affirmation, in v. 115, I shall indeed send it down unto you and the principle that whatever God promises shall come to pass, most commentators maintain that the table was actually sent down (IK, R). And despite the varying accounts of its contents, this table may represent, above all, the descent of spiritual blessings and nourishment (R).

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And when God said, “O Jesus son of Mary! Didst thou say unto mankind, ‘Take me and my mother as gods apart from God?’” He said, “Glory be to Thee! It is not for me to utter that to which I have no right. Had I said it, Thou wouldst surely have known it. Thou knowest what is in my self and I know not what is in Thy Self. Truly it is Thou Who knowest best the things unseen.

Some assert that God’s questioning of Jesus in this verse took place immediately after his ascension (3:55; 4:158). Yet the verse seems, rather, to bring the discussion back to God’s questioning the prophets, apparently on the Day of Judgment, about how people responded to their messages, as initiated in v. 109. Although many prophets and their messages were forgotten over time, the issue here
is the extent to which Jesus’ spiritual station was exaggerated by his followers after
his death to the point that they attributed divinity to him and his mother. Following
immediately upon the warning in v. 115 that whoever disbelieved after the miracle
of the table would be punished, this verse suggests that this is the disbelief of which
they had been warned.

Although traditional Christian doctrine does not view Mary as a member of the
Trinity, the Quran may here be referring to certain Orthodox and Roman Catholic
doctrines regarding Mary, for example, her identification as Theotokos, or “Mother
of God,” which is a doctrinal extension of the Christian belief in Christ’s divinity.
The implicit criticism of the divinization of Mary here may also suggest that she is
understood to be the third person in the Trinity as it is criticized by the Quran (cf.
4:171; 5:73), rather than the “Holy Spirit,” since the latter term is used in the
Quran, as already mentioned, primarily as a reference to the Archangel Gabriel,
and it is never suggested that he was improperly divinized. In this verse, however,
the Quran may be criticizing not Christian doctrinal formulations concerning Mary,
but rather popular Christian exaggerations of Mary’s status that approach
divinization, similar to the Quranic criticism in 9:31: They have taken their rabbis
and monks as lords apart from God, as well as the Messiah, son of Mary, though
they were only commanded to worship one God.

Connecting the belief in Jesus’ divinity to his miraculous actions recounted in v.
110, al-Rāzī says that if Christians consider Jesus’ miracles to have been “created”
by him at will—that is, that he, rather than God, had full control over them—then
they effectively consider him Divine (R). Jesus indicates that he bears no
responsibility for such exaggerations of his or his mother’s status, but rather than
directly denying that he commanded his followers to take him and his mother as
gods apart from God, he demonstrates an attitude of proper comportment before
God by offering a response of perfect humility, saying he had no right to utter such
a thing (Bḍ, R). His further response is similar to that given by the prophets in v.
109, indicating that his testimony is ultimately unnecessary, since God knows all
things, including the things unseen (see v. 109 and commentary), thus properly
deferring the matter to Him (R). Jesus’ statement that God knows what is in his self,
but that he does not know what is in God’s Self, may simply mean that God knows
whatever Jesus knows, while God’s Knowledge remains unknown to Jesus (Z), or
that God knows what Jesus might hide within himself, but that Jesus does not know
what is hidden in God (R). Self, used in connection with both Jesus and God,
translates nafs; in the case of Jesus, it refers to his human soul, whereas in the case
of God, it can be said to refer to His Essence (R).

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I said naught to them save that which Thou commanded me: ‘Worship God, my Lord and your Lord.’ And I was a witness over them, so long as I remained among them. But when Thou didst take me [to Thyself], it was Thou Who wast the Watcher over them. And Thou art Witness over all things.

If Thou punisheth them, they are indeed Thy servants, but if Thou forgiveth them, then indeed Thou art the Mighty, the Wise.”

117–18  Worship God, my Lord and your Lord is a common formulation of the prophetic message found throughout the Quran. Jesus gives this same command in 3:51; 5:72; 19:36; 43:64; it is attributed to Hūd in 11:56, Moses in 40:27 and 44:20, and Muhammad in 2:139 and 42:15. Continuing in the same tone of humility seen in vv. 109 and 116, Jesus claims no ability to be witness for his people after his time on earth; his witness lasted only for the duration of his earthly life, but God, he says, is Witness over all things. In fact, some maintain that the purpose of God’s question to Jesus in v. 116 was to inform Jesus of his followers’ actions after he was no longer among them rather than to obtain knowledge of things that God, being omniscient, would have already known (T).

Jesus further manifests his humility before God by refusing to suggest either the punishment or the forgiveness of his errant followers; instead, he entrusts the matter entirely to God. Although the error of taking Jesus and his mother as gods apart from God (v. 116) might be considered by some as a form of shirk (ascribing partners to God, “idolatry”) and thus as “unforgiveable,” according to 4:48 and 4:116, many commentators suggest that these Christian beliefs do not actually rise to the level of shirk, but are rather considered mere “sins,” which God may certainly forgive (R). The Ashʿarites, who refuse to limit God’s freedom to assign reward or punishment by making it contingent upon human actions, consider His possible forgiveness of Christian errors of belief as fully within the scope of His just action and Wisdom (R). Jesus’ suggestion that God may forgive his followers, while also leaving the matter of their punishment or forgiveness completely in God’s Hands, indicates the proper manner in which prophets intercede for their people, and some consider this verse a proof that God may accept the intercession of prophets on behalf of their sinful followers (R). According to a hadīth, the Prophet was once heard praying from night until morning, reciting only v. 118 in
each cycle of prayer. When a Companion, Abū Dharr, asked him about this matter, the Prophet responded that he had been asking His Lord for the ability to intercede for his community and that it had been granted for all those who were innocent of the sin of *shirk* (IK).

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119 God said, “This is the Day wherein the truthful shall benefit from their truthfulness. For them shall be Gardens with rivers running below, abiding therein forever. God is content with them, and they are content with Him. That is the great triumph.”

Commentators consider God’s statement here to be the final part of His address to Jesus, either immediately after his ascension or more likely on the Day of Judgment (R, Ṭ). This verse concludes the account of God’s reckoning with the prophets and their followers in vv. 109–18 with a promise of bliss in the Hereafter for those who are truthful. Cf. 33:7–8, where a connection is made between the covenant God establishes with the prophets and His questioning the truthful . . . concerning their truthfulness; and 33:24, where God rewards the truthful for their truthfulness. The reward for truthfulness is said to apply only to those who were truthful in their earthly lives, when it was a matter of choice. None can avoid being truthful on the Day of Judgment (not even Satan), but they are not rewarded for it (R, Z).

The present verse brings together several common descriptions of inward and outward paradisal bliss that are repeated throughout the Quran. The blessed will abide forever in Gardens with rivers running below, an image presented dozens of times throughout the Quran (see 2:25 and commentary). They experience a state of mutual contentment with God, also mentioned in 9:100; 58:22; 89:28; 98:8. Al-Rāzī describes this state of mutual contentment as one of the wondrous secrets of Paradise whose reality cannot be described in words (R). The bliss of the Hereafter is always described in the Quran as a state of joy that is calm and peaceful, and “contentment” is mentioned as the characteristic of paradisal existence in 3:15; 9:21, 72; 22:59; 69:21; 88:9; 92:21; 93:5; 101:7. Moreover, deeds are considered righteous insofar as they are undertaken with the intention of seeking God’s Contentment with them; see 3:174; 5:2, 16; 9:109; 19:6; 57:27; 59:8. Finally, attaining the reward of Paradise is described as the great triumph, a phrase connected with the blessings of Paradise throughout the Quran (see, e.g., 3:185; 4:13; 6:16; 9:72, 89, 100; 10:64; 45:30; 48:5). Some commentators,
however, indicate that in the present verse, *the great triumph* describes the state of mutual contentment with God to the exclusion of the other paradisal blessings (Qu, R). This is supported by reading this verse in conjunction with 9:72: *God has promised the believing men and the believing women Gardens with rivers running below, to abide therein, and goodly dwellings in the Gardens of Eden. But Contentment from God is greater; that is the great triumph!* Contentment from God (*riḍwān*) is thus understood to allude to the highest Paradise.

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120 Unto God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and whatsoever is therein, and He is Powerful over all things.

Some view this statement as a final rebuke to those who would attribute divinity to Jesus and Mary (mentioned in v. 116), indicating that they, along with all beings, fall under God’s Sovereignty and Power (Aj, Ṭ). Al-Rāzī says that this verse is meant as a final warning to people that they, like all created beings, animate and inanimate, are completely under God’s Power and submitted to His Will, and that whatever knowledge or power they may ascribe to themselves is nothing before His Knowledge and Power. Al-Rāzī notes that this *sūrah* opens with a reminder to the believers to “fulfill their pacts” with God and proceeds to outline various ritual and legal requirements that they must meet. But the *sūrah* ends with the final absorption of the individual soul in the totality of God’s Reality. If the *sūrah* opens by establishing the laws governing the servant and thus the relationship of servanthood to Lordship, it ends with the reminder that all that is other than God is contingent in essence and remains completely within God’s Sovereignty and Power (R).