A Makkan sūrah (Q), *al-Naml* takes its name from the valley of the ants through which Solomon’s army passes, mentioned in v. 18. The sūrah opens with several verses articulating common themes in the Quran regarding Final Judgment in the Hereafter and then turns to Moses’ encounter with the fire on the mountain, from which God spoke charging him with his mission to go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites (vv. 7–14). This is followed by an account of Solomon with his miraculous host of men, jinn, and birds and his encounter with the Queen of Sheba, who eventually comes before Solomon and embraces faith in the One God (vv. 15–44). The story of the Arabian prophet Šāliḥ and his people, the Thamūd, is recounted (vv. 45–53), describing a plot devised by Šāliḥ’s people to murder him. Lot’s story, including the destruction of his people for their iniquities, is told briefly (vv. 54–58). Next are several verses that challenge readers to meditate upon the Nature of God and His creation; the refrain *Is there a god alongside God?* punctuates the passage several times (vv. 59–64).

The disbelievers challenge the Prophet regarding the reality of bodily resurrection and the coming of the end of the world and are then reminded that only God knows what is hidden in the heavens and on the earth and within the hearts of human beings (vv. 65–72). Verses describing how God will judge between those who differ on religious matters (vv. 75–81) are followed by a section that discusses eschatological realities, such as the “beast” that will rise as one of the portents of the end of the
world, the marshaling of religious communities and the terror human beings will experience at the end of the world, the destruction of the mountains, and the consequences for those who do good and those who do evil (vv. 82–93).

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

1. َط. س. These are the signs of the Quran and a clear Book, 2. a guidance and glad tidings for the believers, 3. who perform the prayer and give the alms, and of the Hereafter are certain. 4. Truly those who believe not in the Hereafter, We have made their deeds seem fair unto them, while they wander confused. 5. It is they who shall have a terrible punishment, and in the Hereafter it is they who are the greatest losers. 6. Truly thou dost receive the Quran from the Presence of One who is Wise, Knowing. 7. [Remember] when Moses said unto his family, “Verily, I perceive a fire. I shall bring you some news therefrom, or a brand, that haply you may warm yourselves.” 8. Then when he came to it, a call came unto him, “Blessed is the One in the fire, and the one around it. And glory be to God, Lord of the worlds! 9. O Moses! Verily, it is I, God, the Mighty, the Wise!” 10. And, “Cast thy staff!” Then when he saw it quivering like a serpent, he turned in retreat without returning. “O Moses! Fear not! Verily the messengers fear not in My Presence, 11. save one who did wrong, then replaced evil with good. For truly I am Forgiving, Merciful. 12. And insert thy hand in thy bosom; it will come forth white, without blemish—among nine signs to Pharaoh and his people. Truly they have been an iniquitous people.”
And when Our signs came to them as a clear portent, they said, “This is manifest sorcery!” They rejected them—though their souls were convinced of them—wrongfully and exultantly. So behold how the workers of corruption fared in the end! And indeed We gave unto David and Solomon knowledge. And they said, “Praise be to God, Who has favored us above many of His believing servants.” Solomon inherited from David and said, “O mankind, we have been taught the language of the birds, and we have been given of all things. Truly this is clear bounty!” And gathered for Solomon were his hosts of jinn and men and birds, and they were marshaled [in ordered ranks], till when they came to the valley of the ants, an ant said, “O ants! Enter your dwellings, lest Solomon and his hosts crush you, while they are unaware.” And he smiled, laughing at her words, and said, “My Lord! Inspire me to give thanks for Thy blessing wherewith Thou hast blessed me and my parents and to work righteousness pleasing to Thee, and cause me to enter, through Thy Mercy, among Thy righteous servants!” And he surveyed the birds and said, “How is it that I do not see the hoopoe? Or is he among those who are absent? I will surely punish him with a severe punishment, or I shall slaughter him, unless he brings me a clear warrant.” But he tarried not long, and said, “I have comprehended that which thou hast not comprehended, and I bring you a sure report from Sheba. Verily, I found a woman ruling over them, and she has been given of all things, and hers is a mighty throne!” I found her and her people prostrating to
the sun, apart from God, and Satan has made their actions seem fair unto them, and turned them from the way, such that they are not rightly guided. Will they not prostrate unto God, Who brings forth what is hidden in the heavens and on the earth, and Who knows what you hide and what you disclose? God, there is no god but He, Lord of the mighty Throne!” He said, “We shall see if you have spoken the truth or if you are among the liars. Go with this letter of mine and deliver it unto them. Then turn away from them and observe what they send back.” She said, “O notables! Truly a noble letter has been delivered unto me. Verily, it is from Solomon and verily it is, ‘In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. Do not exalt yourselves against me, but come unto me in submission.’” She said, “O notables! Give me your opinion in this matter of mine. I am not one to decide on any matter unless you are present.” They said, “We are possessed of strength and possessed of great might. But the command is thine; so consider what thou wouldst command.” She said, “Verily, kings, when they enter a town, corrupt it, and make the most honorable of its people the most abased. They will do likewise. I will send a gift to them, and observe what the envoys bring back.” But when it came to Solomon, he said, “Do you offer me wealth? What God has given me is better than what He has given you. Nay, but it is you who exult in your gift!” “Return unto them, for we shall come upon them with hosts they cannot withstand, and we shall expel them hence, abased, and they shall be humbled.” He said, “O
notables! Which of you will bring me her throne before they come unto me in submission?” 39 An īfrīt among the jinn said, “I will bring it to thee before thou risest from thy place. Truly I have the strength for it, [and] am trustworthy.” 40 The one who had knowledge of the Book said, “I will bring it to thee in the blink of an eye.” Then when he saw it set before him, he said, “This is of the Bounty of my Lord, to try me whether I will give thanks or be ungrateful. And whosoever give thanks, he gives thanks only for his own soul; and whosoever is ungrateful, truly my Lord is Self-Sufficient, Generous.” 41 He said, “Disguise her throne for her. We shall see if she is rightly guided or if she is among those who are not rightly guided.” 42 Then when she came, it was said, “Is your throne like this?” She said, “It seems the same.” [Solomon said], “And we were given knowledge before her and we were submitters, while that which she worshipped apart from God barred her; verily she was from a disbelieving people.” 43 It was said unto her, “Enter the pavilion.” But when she saw it, she supposed it to be an expanse of water and bared her legs. He said, “Verily it is a pavilion paved with crystal.” She said, “My Lord! Surely I have wronged myself, and I submit with Solomon to God, Lord of the worlds.” 44 And indeed We sent to Thamūd their brother Sāliḥ, [saying], “Worship God!” And behold, they were two groups, quarreling. 45 He said, “O my people! Why do you seek to hasten evil before good? Why do you not seek Forgiveness of God, that haply you may be shown mercy?” 46 They said, “We augur ill of you and of those with you.”
He said, “Your auguring ill is with God. Rather, you are a people being tried.” And in the city there were nine persons working corruption in the land and not setting matters aright. They said, “Swear by God to each other that we shall attack him and his family by night. Then we shall surely say to his heir that we were not present at the destruction of his family and that surely we are truthful.” And they devised a plot, and We devised a plot, while they were not aware. So behold how their plot fared in the end; truly We destroyed them and their people all together. And those are their houses, lying desolate for their having done wrong. Surely in this is a sign for a people who know. We saved those who believed and were reverent. And [We sent] Lot, when he said to his people, “Do you commit indecency, though you see? Do you really come with desire unto men instead of women? Nay, but you are an ignorant people!” Yet the reply of his people was naught but to say, “Expel the family of Lot from your town! Truly they are people who keep themselves pure!” So We saved him and his family, except for his wife. We decreed that she should be among those who lagged behind. And We poured down upon them a rain—evil is the rain of those who were warned! Say, “Praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen.” Is God better, or the partners they ascribe? He, Who created the heavens and the earth, and sent down water for you from the sky, through which We make grow beautiful gardens, whose trees it is not for you to make grow? Is there a god alongside God? Nay, but they
are a people who ascribe equals. He, Who made the earth a dwelling place, and made rivers to run through it, and made firm mountains for it, and made between the two seas a barrier? Is there a god alongside God? Nay, but most of them know not. He, Who answers the one in distress when he calls upon Him and removes the evil, and Who makes you vicegerents of the earth? Is there a god alongside God? Little do you reflect! He, Who guides you in the darkness of land and sea, and sends the winds as glad tidings ahead of His Mercy? Is there a god alongside God? Exalted is God above the partners they ascribe! He, Who brings creation into being, then brings it back, and Who provides for you from Heaven and the earth? Is there a god alongside God? Say, “Bring your proof, if you are truthful.” Say, “None in the heavens or on the earth know the Unseen, save God. And they are not aware of when they will be resurrected.” Nay, but does their knowledge reach to the Hereafter? Nay, but they are in doubt concerning it; indeed, they are blind to it. And those who disbelieve say, “What? When we and our fathers are dust, shall we indeed be brought forth? Indeed, we were promised this, we and our fathers, before. This is naught but fables of those of old!” Say, “Journey upon the earth and behold how the guilty fared in the end!” And grieve not for them, and be not distressed by what they plot. And they say, “When will this promise come to pass, if you are truthful?” Say, “It may be that some of what you seek to hasten is close behind you.” And truly thy Lord is Possessed of Bounty toward mankind, but most
And surely thy Lord knows that which their breasts conceal and that which they disclose. And there is nothing hidden in Heaven or on the earth, but that it is in a clear Book. Verily, this Quran recounts unto the Children of Israel most of that wherein they differ, and verily it is a guidance and a mercy for the believers. Verily thy Lord shall judge between them by His Judgment, and He is the Mighty, the Knowing. So trust in God; truly thou standest upon the manifest truth. Surely thou dost not make the dead hear; nor dost thou make the deaf hear the call when they turn their backs; nor canst thou guide the blind away from their error. Thou canst only make hear those who believe in Our signs and are submitters. And when the Word comes upon them, We shall bring forth for them a beast from the earth who will speak to them of how mankind was not certain of Our signs. And on that Day We shall gather from every community a group of those who denied Our signs, and they shall be marshaled [in ordered ranks], till, when they come, He will say, “Did you deny My signs, though you encompassed them not in knowledge? What is it that you used to do?” And the Word will come upon them for their having done wrong, and they shall not speak. Have they not considered that We made the night that they might rest therein, and the day by which to see? Truly in that are signs for a people who believe. And on that Day the trumpet will be blown, and whosoever is in the heavens and on the earth will be terrified, save whom God wills, and all will come to Him in abject
humility. And thou seest the mountains that thou dost suppose are solid pass away like clouds—the Work of God, Who perfects all things. Truly He is Aware of whatsoever you do. Whosoever brings a good deed, he will have that which is better than it. And that Day they will be secure from terror. And whosoever brings an evil deed, their faces shall be cast down into the Fire. Are you recompensed for aught save that which you used to do? Truly I am commanded to worship the Lord of this city, Who has made it sacred. And unto Him belong all things. And I am commanded to be among those who submit, and to recite the Quran. So whosoever is rightly guided, he is guided only for his own soul. And [as for] whosoever is astray, say, “Verily, I am but a warner.” And say, “Praise be to God! He will show you His signs, and you will know them.” And thy Lord is not heedless of what you do.

Commentary

These are the signs of the Quran and a clear Book,

For a discussion of the separated letters that appear at the start of some sūrah(s), see 2:1c. Some say the Ṭāʾ represents the Divine Name al-Latīf (“the Subtle”) and the sīn the Name al-Samīʿ (“the Hearing”), while others say the ṭāʾ represents purity (ṭahārah) and the sīn the mystery (sirr) of the Beloved (Th). Or these two particular letters, also see 26:1c. These are the signs refers to the verses (āyāt, lit. “signs”) of this sūrah, while a clear Book refers to the Preserved Tablet (85:22; R) or the Quran (Q). Cf. 10:1; 12:1; 13:1; 15:1; 26:1; 28:1; 31:2.

***
a guidance and glad tidings for the believers,

This pairing of guidance and glad tidings also appears in 2:97 and 16:102.

who perform the prayer and give the alms, and of the Hereafter are certain.

The pairing of the prayer (Ṣalāh; see 2:3c) and the alms (zakāh) occurs throughout the Quran (2:43, 83, 110, 177, 277; 4:77, 162; 5:12, 55; 7:156; 9:5, 11, 18, 71; 19:31, 55; 21:73; 22:41, 78; 24:37, 56; 31:4; 33:33; 58:13; 73:20; 98:5). Being certain of the Hereafter is a description that also appears in 2:4 and 31:4, and it encompasses belief in the Resurrection, Judgment, the Garden, and the Fire (IK).

Truly those who believe not in the Hereafter, We have made their deeds seem fair unto them, while they wander confused.

The description of actions being made to seem fair (zuyyina) to people is found throughout the Quran (e.g., 2:212; 3:14; 6:43; 6:108, 122, 137; 8:48; 9:37; 10:12; 13:33; 15:39; 16:63; 27:24: 29:38; 35:8; 40:37; 41:25; 47:14; 48:12; 49:7). In this verse, God is the agent of making worldly things seem fair (i.e., beautiful or good) to human beings; in other passages it is Satan; and in still others the verb is passive, as in 9:37: The evil of their deeds is made to seem fair unto them. Making what is bad “seem fair” is a common theme connecting fallen human beings to their passions and can mean, in other contexts, to “adorn” (15:16), meaning that one’s actions were, as it were, “adorned” (made to seem good) in the eyes of those who believe not in the Hereafter. To wander confused (cf. 6:110; 7:186; 10:11; 23:75) can mean to vacillate between sin and error and to engage in empty play (Q), a state resulting directly from one’s attachment to the ephemeral objects of the world, which renders one incapable of practicing the spiritual life (Qu).
It is they who shall have a terrible punishment, and in the Hereafter it is they who are the greatest losers.

Some say the terrible punishment can refer to any punishment in this world or the Hereafter (R), but others situate such loss and punishment in this world, seeing the punishment as a reference to the Battle of Badr (see the introduction to Sūrah 8; Z). Some connect greatest losers with the symbolism of buying and selling employed throughout the Quran, for example, when the Quran warns people about purchasing error at the price of guidance (cf. 2:16, 86, 175; T). Others explain this phrase by saying that some people lose the world and gain the Hereafter, but these people do the opposite and hence are the greatest losers (Q).

Truly thou dost receive the Quran from the Presence of One who is Wise, Knowing.

Some commentators describe this verse as a kind of introduction to the stories of the prophets that follow (Q, R). Sufis meditating upon this verse read it beyond its context as addressed to the Prophet; they say that no one can be considered among those firmly rooted in knowledge (al-rāsikhūn fiʾl-ʿilm, mentioned in 3:7) until one recites the Quran “through God” (biʾLlāh) and hears it “from God” (min Allāh)—that is, hears it from the Presence of One who is Wise, Knowing (Aj).

[Remember] when Moses said unto his family, “Verily, I perceive a fire. I shall bring you some news therefrom, or a brand, that haply you may warm yourselves.”

In Sufism, this verse symbolizes the levels of certainty envisioned as progressive stages in the spiritual life: (1) having conceptual knowledge of the fire, (2) seeing that fire, and (3) being burned or consumed by it symbolize (1) theoretical knowledge about spiritual matters, (2) direct vision of spiritual realities, and (3) the realization attained when the substance of the soul is transformed by being consumed by the Truth.

Some understand family (ahl) here to refer to Moses’ wife only, which is one
possible meaning of ahl (R). Some news refers to information about the road, since they had become lost on their journey (IK, R). (Cf. 28:29; Exodus 3:1–6.)

***

8 Then when he came to it, a call came unto him, “Blessed is the One in the fire, and the one around it. And glory be to God, Lord of the worlds!

8 The One in the fire is understood to refer to God Himself, so that, according to some, this phrase means that it was the fire that was blessed or that the Light of God within the fire was blessed (/tcp). The one around it refers to the angels or to Moses and the angels together (tcp), meaning that Moses and the angels are blessed by God (Th). For some this means that the fire itself is what is blessed, since the Arabic particle man, which is rendered here as the one, but ordinarily means “who” or “one [who],” can also have the more general meaning of mā, or “what,” so that it would mean, “Blessed is that which is in the fire,” meaning the fire itself (Th). In trying to understand this verse in relation to the description of this same incident in 28:30, which speaks of the location as the blessed site, some interpret blessed to mean that it is the place of the fire that is blessed (Z), because it is the place where this great event took place (R). Still others say that blessed is implies, “Blessed is the one [seeking after] the fire,” or, “Blessed is the One [whose power and authority is] in the fire” (Th). Such different interpretations of the meaning of blessed is arise, because ordinarily this form of the verb (bāraka) takes a direct or indirect object (Q, Th), but in this case there is no object for the verb. Blessed (the passive verb būrika) is also understood to mean “holy” (muqaddas; IK, Th).

Some note that the phenomenon was described as fire (nār), but was actually light (nūr); Moses deemed it “fire,” but the Arabs are said to have sometimes used the word “fire” (nār) in the place of “light” (nūr; Q, Th). Ibn ʿAbbās said it was not fire, but a flickering light, and in another statement he referred to it as the “Light of the Lord of the worlds” (IK).

It is in the context of this verse that many commentators mention the hadīth: “God sleeps not; nor is it proper to Him to sleep. He lowers justice and raises it. He raises to Himself the deeds of the night before the day, and the deeds of the day before the night. His veil is light [or fire]. If it were removed, the glories of His Face would burn up everything whose sight fell upon It.”

***
9 O Moses! Verily, it is I, God, the Mighty, the Wise!”

9 Because of the different ways in which this verse can be read, *Verily, it is I, God* could also be understood to mean, “It is the case that truly I am God” (Ṭ). It can also be read as simply denoting the beginning of a new clause, so that it would be rendered, “O Moses! I am God” (R, Z).

It is worth noting that the ambiguity in the Arabic between *annahu anāʾLlāh* and *innahu anāʾLlāh*, which leads to the aforementioned interpretations, is not the same type of ambiguity that fuels debates surrounding the Hebrew *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, which God says to Moses as recounted in Exodus 3:14 and which is rendered in numerous ways, such as “I am that I am,” “I am Who I am,” “I am He who is,” or “I will be what I will be.” The Islamic understanding of what God said during this event, namely, that He identified Himself by His Name, overlaps with those currents of Jewish and Christian understanding of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* that hold that this phrase is or contains a Name of God.

***

10 And, “Cast thy staff!” Then when he saw it quivering like a serpent, he turned in retreat without returning. “O Moses! Fear not! Verily the messengers fear not in My Presence,

11 save one who did wrong, then replaced evil with good. For truly I am Forgiving, Merciful.

10–11 *And* at the start of v. 10 could also be understood as connecting v. 10 to the statement in v. 9, so that the translation would be, “I am God, the Mighty, the Wise; so cast thy staff.” *Without returning* is also interpreted to mean without looking to one side or the other (Q, Ṭ), implying so little hesitation that he did not even venture a sideways glance.

In this passage, *save one who did wrong* is considered an oblique reference to Moses himself, who struck and killed an Egyptian who was fighting with an Israelite (see 28:15–21; cf. Exodus 2:11–14) and perhaps feared God’s Presence on this account (Ṭ). To *replace evil with good* means to repent for one’s sins (Ṭ). The particle *illā*, which ordinarily means “except” or “save,” can also have other meanings. Here some commentators understand it so that the sentence would read, “Verily the messengers fear not in My Presence, and neither does one who did
wrong and replaced evil with good” (Ṭ). It is likely that those who search for alternate meanings for illā do so out of a reluctance to attribute sin to prophets and messengers, because their infallibility and protection from sin is an important doctrine among the vast majority of Muslim theologians. As al-Qurṭubī points out, however, many accept that prophets could have committed “errors” (dhanb) before their investiture with prophethood; moreover, it is a sign of sincerity that one fears that one’s repentance is not complete. A saying attributed al-Ḥasan al- Başbakanī says, “Prophets sin and are chastised” (Q, Ṭ).

***

12 And insert thy hand in thy bosom; it will come forth white, without blemish—among nine signs to Pharaoh and his people. Truly they have been an iniquitous people.”

12 The miracle of the white hand (cf. 20:22; 26:33; 28:32) is demonstrated to Moses here, before being made to appear again later in the presence of Pharaoh (26:33). On the nine signs, see 17:101c, which speaks of the nine clear signs given to Moses. As a spiritual symbol, the white hand can mean that one should place one’s spiritual meditation into one’s heart, and one’s thoughts will then emerge white and gleaming, which will lead to greater understanding and vision and a fuller realization of the virtues necessary to journey to God (Aj).

***

13 And when Our signs came to them as a clear portent, they said, “This is manifest sorcery!”

14 They rejected them—though their souls were convinced of them—wrongfully and exultantly. So behold how the workers of corruption fared in the end!

13–14 It was the arrogance of Pharaoh and his people that prevented them from accepting what they knew to be true in their hearts (Ṭ). The final phrase of v. 14 is a frequent refrain that appears in the Quran in the context of previous peoples whose ultimate disappearance or destruction serves as a lesson to later peoples; see 30:9c.
And indeed We gave unto David and Solomon knowledge. And they said, “Praise be to God, Who has favored us above many of His believing servants.”

15 This knowledge is considered by some to be the wisdom and understanding proper to prophethood (Q); for others it refers to the special favors mentioned in vv. 16–17 (Ṭ) or the forms of knowledge mentioned in 21:80: *And We taught him how to make garments for you to protect you against your own might.* Some note that this verse shows the eminence of knowledge among the gifts that God bestows, as mentioned in 58:11: *God will raise in degrees those among you who believe and those who have been given knowledge* (Q). David and Solomon’s gratitude for their God-given knowledge surpasses their gratitude for their kingdom, and the knowledge that they possess is beyond that of ordinary believers and necessarily includes, given that they were prophets, an awareness and remembrance of God at all moments (R).

Solomon inherited from David and said, “O mankind, we have been taught the language of the birds, and we have been given of all things. Truly this is clear bounty!”

16 Knowledge of the language of the birds was something Solomon inherited from David (R); it is mentioned in 21:79: *We compelled the mountains and the birds to glorify along with David;* and 34:10: *And indeed We gave David bounty from Us: “O mountains! Echo God’s praises with him, likewise you birds!”* See also 38:19, which states regarding David: *And the birds gathered, each turning oft unto Him.* The phrase given of all things does not mean literally everything, but “much” or “abundantly” (R). The idea of the “language of the birds” became an important idea in Sufi thought, often symbolizing higher states of consciousness that enable one to understand the deeper significance of things beyond their outward appearances. Some Sufis have interpreted this phrase to mean not only knowledge of an esoteric character in general, but more specifically knowledge of the inner meaning of other religions. One of the most famous works of Sufism is the *Manṭiq al-ṭayr* of ʿAṭṭār, which is usually rendered “Conference of the Birds,” but which has the identical Arabic terms as the phrase in this verse.
And gathered for Solomon were his hosts of jinn and men and birds, and they were marshaled [in ordered ranks],

17 Marshaled translates yūzaʿūn, which some interpret as meaning “corralled” or “kept in check,” as in keeping the lines together and being tightly grouped (Q, Ṭ). For others marshaled means that they moved forward or else that they were defenders against attacks (Ṭ). For some Solomon’s hosts were particular to his time and the birds serving him were unlike those of other times, though even normal birds (like all creatures) possess a measure of intelligence and inspiration proper to their state of being (R). The inclusion of jinn as part of Solomon’s host indicates not only that it was of a miraculous and wondrous nature, but also that Solomon had the stature and power to control and make use of the jinn, beings ordinarily considered uncontrollable by human beings and most often mischievous.

***

till when they came to the valley of the ants, an ant said, “O ants! Enter your dwellings, lest Solomon and his hosts crush you, while they are unaware.”

And he smiled, laughing at her words, and said, “My Lord! Inspire me to give thanks for Thy blessing wherewith Thou hast blessed me and my parents and to work righteousness pleasing to Thee, and cause me to enter, through Thy Mercy, among Thy righteous servants!”

18–19 Some commentators say that the ants were winged, thus making them ṭayr, or “birds,” whose language Solomon understood (Q, Ṭḥ). Also, a number of commentators actually give a name for the ant, though others say it is inconceivable that one could possibly know such a detail (Q). The ant says while they are unaware, assuming that if a prophet like Solomon knew, he would not crush them (R). Solomon laughed and smiled, because he marveled at the ant’s anxiety and care and felt grateful to God for the privilege of being able to understand the ant’s concerns (Bḍ). Some commentators mention the ḥadīth: “An ant bit a prophet, and
he ordered the anthill burned. God revealed unto him, ‘Did you, because a single ant bit you, destroy a community (ummah) from among the communities that hymn praises [of Me]? Why not a single ant?’” (IK, Q).

*Inspire me* renders *awzaʾnī*, which some understand to mean “make me” (Ṭ); it is in fact the same word rendered *marshaled* in v. 17; the difference in meaning is based on context. Solomon mentioned his parents, because he considered the invocation of blessings upon them to be tantamount to blessings upon himself (R). To *work righteousness* pertains to the life of this world, while being included *among Thy righteous servants* pertains to being in their company in the Hereafter (R).

***

20 And he surveyed the birds and said, “How is it that I do not see the hoopoe? Or is he among those who are absent?

20 The *hoopoe* (*hudhud*) is a medium-sized bird with a long thin bill, notable for a distinctive crest on its head. In the commentary, the hoopoe is described as knowing where the nearest water was, and when Solomon asked about the water, he discovered the hoopoe was absent (Ṭ); others say that he learned of the hoopoe’s absence, because it was the bird’s function to shield Solomon from the sun (R). Some note that Solomon’s reaction shows one of the qualities of a great leader—he was aware of the condition of those he led, down to that of a single bird (Q). As a spiritual allegory and symbol, this passage is interpreted to be a drama between the spiritual heart, or the spirit within one, and the ego. The hoopoe symbolizes an aspect or faculty of the soul, while Solomon is the spiritual heart that must control the soul and take it to task when it disobeys. The soul can become lost in heedlessness of God; yet its faculties are able to bring to the soul knowledge and wisdom previously undiscovered (Aj).

***

21 I will surely punish him with a severe punishment, or I shall slaughter him, unless he brings me a clear warrant.”

21 *Warrant* renders *sulṭān*, in this case meaning some clear evidence or excuse for why the hoopoe was absent (Ṭ).
22 But he tarried not long, and said, “I have comprehended that which thou hast not comprehended, and I bring you a sure report from Sheba.

23 Verily, I found a woman ruling over them, and she has been given of all things, and hers is a mighty throne!

22–23 For Sheba, see commentary on 34:15–19 (in the sūrah of the same name). The Queen of Sheba is known in the Islamic tradition as Bilqīs (or Bilqays) daughter of Sharāḥīl. *Mighty throne* here is understood to refer not only to her power, but also to the actual physical dimensions and richness of the throne (Q, Ṭ, Th). *All things* is understood to mean “everything she needs for her kingdom” (Q). The same phrase also appears in v. 16 in connection with Solomon’s kingdom.

***

24 I found her and her people prostrating to the sun, apart from God, and Satan has made their actions seem fair unto them, and turned them from the way, such that they are not rightly guided.

24 On Satan’s making things *seem fair*, see 27:4c.

***

25 Will they not prostrate unto God, Who brings forth what is hidden in the heavens and on the earth, and Who knows what you hide and what you disclose?

25 This verse could also be read as a continuation of *and turned them from the way* from the previous verse, so that the two verses together would mean, “And turned them from the way, so that they were not rightly guided and so that they did not prostrate.” In this case the first word of v. 25 would be read *alā* rather than *allā*, but both are accepted readings (Q, Ṭ). By *what is hidden* some understand rain (*ghayth*), the fruits of the earth, all things in the heavens and the earth that are
known only to God ( تعالى), or mysteries generally (ق).

***

26 God, there is no god but He, Lord of the mighty Throne!”

Al-Qurṭubī notes that the Queen of Sheba’s throne is called mighty (v. 23) in relation to the other thrones of the sovereigns of the earth, whereas God’s Throne is Mighty because it (or its Pedestal) encompasses the heavens and the earth. This is one of fifteen verses after which it is said that one must prostrate when reciting the Quran; see 19:58c.

***

27 He said, “We shall see if you have spoken the truth or if you are among the liars.

28 Go with this letter of mine and deliver it unto them. Then turn away from them and observe what they send back.”

27–28 In these verses Solomon is speaking to the hoopoe ( تعالى), since the hoopoe had made such a categorical claim in v. 22 regarding what he knew and what Solomon did not know (ق), but it also shows that a leader should accept the legitimate excuses of his followers (ق). Al-Qurṭubī quotes a hadīth that states, “None love excuses more than God. That is why He revealed the Books and sent the messengers.”

***

29 She said, “O notables! Truly a noble letter has been delivered unto me.

30 Verily, it is from Solomon and verily it is, ‘In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.”
The Queen of Sheba called the letter *noble* either because of its seal, because it was sent by Solomon, or because the contents were noble and good (Q, Ṭ). V. 30 is the only verse in the Quran that repeats the entire *basmalah* (the formula with which all *sūrah*s but one begin) in the middle of a *sūrah*.

***

Do not exalt yourselves against me, but come unto me in submission.””

Come . . . in submission means in a state of submission and obedience to God and with faith in His Oneness (Ṭ), though some read it to mean the queen and her notables should approach Solomon in a state of obedience (R) rather than arrogantly or as tyrants, as alluded to in *Do not exalt yourselves against me* (IK).

***

She said, “O notables! Give me your opinion in this matter of mine. I am not one to decide on any matter unless you are present.”

They said, “We are possessed of strength and possessed of great might. But the command is thine; so consider what thou wouldst command.”

The words of the queen’s notables pertain to their worldly power and military strength, the implication being that they were capable of supporting her with their strength in battle (Ṭ). Al-Rāzī considers their response a good one, as it is balanced between deference to the queen and a display of strength. Others note that she likely knew more than they did in any case, and hence her question was more diplomatic than practical (IK). In his commentary on this incident in his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, Ibn ʿArabī notes that the queen’s handling of the letter from Solomon demonstrated her superiority and worthiness to rule. Such attributes along with her willingness to embrace true faith when challenged (unlike other figures such as Pharaoh) can also be interpreted as constituting a Quranic model for beneficent and wise female leadership and governance.
She said, “Verily, kings, when they enter a town, corrupt it, and make the most honorable of its people the most abased. They will do likewise.

The queen uttered this sentence in response to the suggestion by her council of notables that they were strong enough to resist the power of Solomon, meaning that if Solomon were to enter their land, destruction would ensue (Q). Although the plain sense of the queen’s comment is that it is about the way kings or queens overturn the order and harmony of conquered lands, some Sufis read this verse as a spiritual allegory. In his famous Kitab al-ḥikam (“Aphorisms”), Ibn ʿAṭāʾillāh al-Iskandarī sees the kings as symbolic of inspirations that assail the heart from the spiritual world, which, when they are real and true, will enter the town of the heart, topple the dominance of its worldly desires and make them most abased, and replace them with spiritual aspirations that are no longer subordinate to the appetites of the soul (Aj).

I will send a gift to them, and observe what the envoys bring back.”

The commentators give details to the story, describing—sometimes at length—what the gifts were (IK, Ṭ), though it is not completely clear where such information would have come from; commentators such as al-Rāzī dismiss such details as irrelevant to the story.

But when it came to Solomon, he said, “Do you offer me wealth? What God has given me is better than what He has given you. Nay, but it is you who exult in your gift!”

The Queen of Sheba’s worldly possessions were no match for those of Solomon (Ṭ), who in any case was a prophet and therefore not motivated by the acquisition of worldly possessions for their own sake (Q). Exult in your gift means
that the gift was a means of celebrating their own wealth and power rather than a manifestation of generosity or goodness (Ṭ).

***

37 “Return unto them, for we shall come upon them with hosts they cannot withstand, and we shall expel them hence, abased, and they shall be humbled.”

37 These words were spoken by Solomon to the envoy from Sheba (Ṭ).

***

38 He said, “O notables! Which of you will bring me her throne before they come unto me in submission?”

38 The majority hold that these words were said after Solomon received the gifts from Sheba (Q). For others, these words were spoken when the hoopoe first came with news of the Queen of Sheba and her throne and follow upon Solomon’s statement in v. 27: We shall see if you have spoken the truth.

In submission (muslimīn) here is interpreted by some to mean in obedience to Solomon (Q), but by others to mean “as Muslims,” that is, as adherents to the religion of the One God (Ṭ). It is thought that Solomon asked for her throne in order to send her a message of reproof or so that he could later show it to her as a proof of his prophethood (Ṭ).

***

39 An ʿifrīt among the jinn said, “I will bring it to thee before thou risest from thy place. Truly I have the strength for it, [and] am trustworthy.”

39 An ʿifrīt is a kind of jinn (see 2:30c; 6:71–72c; and the introduction to Sūrah 72) that is either a giant (Ṭ), in one account described as big as a mountain (IK), or a mischievously clever jinn (Q,Ṭ). Others say that an ʿifrīt is a man who is foul and bold (R). Al-Qurṭubī mentions a ḥadīth according to which the Prophet overpowers an ʿifrīt that had come to disrupt his prayer. This ḥadīth supports the
The one who had knowledge of the Book said, “I will bring it to thee in the blink of an eye.” Then when he saw it set before him, he said, “This is of the Bounty of my Lord, to try me whether I will give thanks or be ungrateful. And whosoever give thanks, he gives thanks only for his own soul; and whosoever is ungrateful, truly my Lord is Self-Sufficient, Generous.”

The one who had knowledge was a man (Ṭ), whose name is usually given as Āṣif ibn Barkhiyā, who knew a secret Name of God that, when invoked, caused one’s supplication to be answered (Q, Ṭ). It is reported that Ibn Maṣūd said that the man was Khādīr, the name traditionally attributed to the mysterious undying servant of God who became Moses’ teacher in 18:65–82. Some even say that the speaker of these words was Solomon himself and that they were said to the īfrīt (R). Al-Rāzī prefers this last interpretation, since it seems to fit better with the context: as a prophet, Solomon would have been most knowledgeable about the Book, and he expressed gratitude to God for seeing the throne appear before him, implying that Solomon did it himself. By Book is understood the Preserved Tablet (85:22), the books of the prophets, or a book particular to Solomon (R), though what this book could be is not specified.

Blink of an eye renders a phrase that means “immediately,” but literally means something like, “Before your glance returns to you.” For some this phrase means that the man would bring the throne in less time than it would take for a man who was within range of Solomon’s vision to reach him (Ṭ). For others it means that in the time it takes for Solomon to look as far as his sight would reach, the throne would appear before him (Ṭ). For still others, the throne sprang from the ground (Ṭ).

Whether I will give thanks or be ungrateful is interpreted by many to mean that Solomon understood that such amazing blessings as the power to bring a throne from afar contained within them a test of his sincerity (Ṭ). To mention here that God is Self-Sufficient serves to emphasize that He has no need of gratitude from human beings and is neither helped by its presence nor harmed by its absence (Ṭ).
He said, “Disguise her throne for her. We shall see if she is rightly guided or if she is among those who are not rightly guided.”

41  *Disguise* means change the throne (Ṭ), that is, add some things and remove some things (Ṭ) or turn it upside down (Q). *We shall see* implies waiting to see if the queen recognizes it (Ṭ), as it was meant to be a test for her (IK).

***

Then when she came, it was said, “Is your throne like this?” She said, “It seems the same.” [Solomon said], “And we were given knowledge before her and we were submitters,

42  *It seems the same* indicates that she was in doubt (Ṭ). Some say the question was a test of her intelligence; if she said yes or no, she would have been incorrect, because the throne was neither entirely the same nor entirely different, but she correctly evaluated it by saying that it “seemed” like her very throne (Q).

***

while that which she worshipped apart from God barred her; verily she was from a disbelieving people.”

43  The queen’s worship of the sun prevented her from worshipping God properly (Ṭ). A minority opinion considers the possibility that the words beginning *And we were given knowledge before* are a continuation of the words of Bilqīs, alluding to a certain level of acknowledgment of the Power of God and the truth of Solomon’s prophethood before she was shown the wonders of her transformed throne and the glass pavilion mentioned in the subsequent verse, indicating that she was in a sense held back or hindered from the fullness of faith by the erroneous religion she practiced (Z).
It was said unto her, “Enter the pavilion.” But when she saw it, she supposed it to be an expanse of water and bared her legs. He said, “Verily it is a pavilion paved with crystal.” She said, “My Lord! Surely I have wronged myself, and I submit with Solomon to God, Lord of the worlds.”

44 The pavilion is also interpreted to be a palace or fortress. Some commentators note that part of the illusion was that there were actually fish swimming beneath the crystal (Q, R, Ṭ). Part of the folklore attached to this story is that Solomon’s jinn told him that the mother of Bilqīs was a jinn with the legs of an ass, and this ruse was prepared to trick her into exposing her legs; after the incident, other legends say that Solomon fell in love with Bilqīs and married her (Q, R, Ṭ). Ibn Kathīr, echoing al-Rāzī’s sentiment regarding v. 35, sees little value in this folkloric material, which originated in Arab legends and the oral traditions of various converts to Islam from Judaism and Christianity.

Ibn ʿArabī notes in the chapter on Solomon in his Fuṣūṣ that the submission of Bilqīs was superior to that of Pharaoh, because she submitted to the Lord of the worlds without qualification, whereas he submitted (though too late according to many theologians) to the Lord of Moses and Aaron (7:122; 26:48); that is, Bilqīs understood what God was in Himself, whereas Pharaoh’s understanding was limited to the Power of God as manifested through some of His prophets.

Ibn ʿAjībah interprets the encounter between Solomon and Bilqīs on a spiritual level and states that it is a highly complex allegory of the relationship between a spiritual master and a disciple and of the spiritual love between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Among other elements, Ibn ʿAjībah notes that in the spiritual life one relinquishes one’s throne, which symbolizes the soul, and it is transfigured by the spiritual master into something new, but not completely different. Commentaries on Ibn ʿArabī’s Fuṣūṣ mention that Bilqīṣ was taught here a lesson about appearances, about seeing what she believed should not have been there (her throne) and about not seeing what was in reality there (glass, not water), which is a kind of allegory for the challenge of overcoming appearances to reach the true nature of things, a goal of the spiritual life.

***

And indeed We sent to Thamūd their brother Ṣāliḥ, [saying], “Worship God!” And behold, they were two
For a description of the Thamūd, see 7:73c; 11:61c. Other narrative accounts of Ṣāliḥ are found in 7:73–79; 11:61–68; 26:141–58; 54:23–31. The two groups were those who believed in Ṣāliḥ and those who denied him (Ţ).

He said, “O my people! Why do you seek to hasten evil before good? Why do you not seek Forgiveness of God, that haply you may be shown mercy?”

The evil is the Punishment of God, and the good is His Mercy (Ţ). Seek to hasten evil before good may also refer to the fact that the Thamūd’s actions were evil and deserved punishment, and that they committed such actions rather than performing good actions, which merit reward (Q). Cf. 13:6: And they would have thee hasten evil before good, though examples have passed before them.

They said, “We augur ill of you and of those with you.” He said, “Your auguring ill is with God. Rather, you are a people being tried.”

Other verses in which people augur ill of or call their prophets an ill omen are 7:131 and 36:18. Your auguring ill is with God means that those things they predict happening as a result of ill omens are with God (Q), that is, known only to God (Ţ). Any good or evil that they believed would happen to them comes not from any auguring, but originates from God (R). They were being tried precisely by the sending of Ṣāliḥ to them (Ţ). The language of ill omen here is based on the ancient practice of using birds for divination: a bird would be released or chased, and if it went right, it was a good omen, and if went left, a bad one.

And in the city there were nine persons working
corruption in the land and not setting matters aright.

48 Working corruption (*afsada*) and setting matters aright (*aṣlaḥa*) are generally contrasted with one another in the Quran (e.g., 7:142; 26:152). These nine people are singled out because they were those who worked together to hamstring the she-camel and conspired to assassinate Ṣāliḥ (Ṭ). They were among the notables of the city, and their evils included, according to some, corrupt lending practices and a habit of dishonoring and humiliating people (Q).

***

49 They said, “Swear by God to each other that we shall attack him and his family by night. Then we shall surely say to his heir that we were not present at the destruction of his family and that surely we are truthful.”

49 The people swore by God to each other that they would kill Ṣāliḥ and provide alibis for one another to his heir (Ṭ), meaning that they wanted to have an excuse to give to the person upon whom exacting retribution would fall (Q); on the concept of retribution, see 2:178c. According to some, this plot took place three days after they had hamstrung the she-camel (7:77; 11:65; 26:157; 54:29; 91:14) and Ṣāliḥ had informed them of their impending doom; various versions of how their plot was foiled and they came to their death are given in various commentaries, but none are definitive (Q).

***

50 And they devised a plot, and We devised a plot, while they were not aware.

50 In related passages, God is described as best of plotters (3:54; 8:30), and elsewhere it is said that unto God belongs plotting altogether (13:42; cf. 14:46). Almost synonymous with this language is that of God using “schemes” against the disbelievers, and that His scheming is superior to theirs is alluded to in other verses (see 7:99; 52:42; 86:15–17; cf. 10:21).
So behold how their plot fared in the end; truly We destroyed them and their people all together.

Asking how people fared in the end is a common refrain in the Quran, an invitation to meditate upon the ultimate downfall of previous peoples who were wicked (cf. 12:109; 30:9, 42; 35:44; 40:21, 82; 47:10).

And those are their houses, lying desolate for their having done wrong. Surely in this is a sign for a people who know.

The wrong they did was their idolatry and denial of their prophet (Ṭ). One interpretation of houses, lying desolate, beyond the outward sense of their now empty dwellings, is that their hearts were hardened through their disobedience (Su).

We saved those who believed and were reverent.

Some commentators say that those who were saved with Ṣāliḥ settled in Ramallah in Palestine (Ṭ), while others say that the saved, numbering some four thousand, went to Ḥadramawt, where Ṣāliḥ died. It is said that the place is called Ḥadramawt because it is where he died, since the word can mean “death has come” (Q), but this is one of several legendary etymologies for this place-name.

And [We sent] Lot, when he said to his people, “Do you commit indecency, though you see?

Do you really come with desire unto men instead of women? Nay, but you are an ignorant people!”

On the story of Lot in the Quran, see commentary on 11:77–83. As
discussed in 26:165–66c, the indecency is understood to refer to anal intercourse, especially by men with men, but also according to some with women (Ţ). Al-Rāzī points out that part of their sin was that they were open about their illicit activity and did not seek to keep it from view, and it went against the Wisdom of God, who did not create men sexually for men. Though you see means that they knew their deeds were indecent (R).

***

Yet the reply of his people was naught but to say, “Expel the family of Lot from your town! Truly they are people who keep themselves pure!”

56 Keep themselves pure renders the verb taţahhara (cf. 7:82), which in other contexts is a term of praise for those who believe (2:222; 9:108), but here is used by Lot’s people pejoratively. It means, “They are trying to keep themselves pure [from our sexual practices]” (R, T).

***

So We saved him and his family, except for his wife. We decreed that she should be among those who lagged behind.

57 Lot’s wife is also mentioned in 7:83; 15:60; 26:171; 29:33; 37:135.

***

And We poured down upon them a rain—evil is the rain of those who were warned!

58 On this evil rain, also see 25:40.

***

Say, “Praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants
whom He has chosen.” Is God better, or the partners they ascribe?

He, Who created the heavens and the earth, and sent down water for you from the sky, through which We make grow beautiful gardens, whose trees it is not for you to make grow? Is there a god alongside God? Nay, but they are a people who ascribe equals.

59–64 This is a section devoted to descriptions of God in the form of rhetorical questions, ending with the refrain Is there a god alongside God? The questions beginning He, Who are structured to seem as though they will end with a comparison between God and something else, but instead they arrive at the question, Is there a god alongside God? By implication they are asking in so many different ways the question posed in v. 59: Is God better, or the partners they ascribe? The questions beginning with He, Who, whose grammar suggests a comparison that is not actually made explicit (cf. 13:33), imply that God’s Power and Beneficence are so great that one should not even offer an explicit comparison with Him.

60 Ascribe equals renders yaʿdilūn, which can also mean “swerve or turn away,” since this particular verb changes meaning depending on the preposition that follows it, and both meanings are accepted by commentators. In this case there is no preposition to indicate which shade of meaning is being emphasized. Gardens renders ḥadāʾiq (sing. ḥadīqah), which are walled gardens (Ṭ) or gardens of palm trees (Q). Beautiful renders bahjah, understood to connote here edible flowers or simply anything from which human beings and animals eat (Ṭ). It is not for you to make grow refers to the fact that if God were not to provide water, these trees would not flourish (Ṭ). Al-Rāzī notes that this verse disabuses people of the idea that a human being makes a tree grow, when all aspects of its being and survival originate with God. See also 56:63–64: Have you considered what you reap? Is it you who sow it or are We the sowers?

***

He, Who made the earth a dwelling place, and made rivers to run through it, and made firm mountains for it, and made between the two seas a barrier? Is there a god
alongside God? Nay, but most of them know not.

61 The two seas are also mentioned in 25:53; 35:12; 55:19. Some note that within the soul there are two seas, the sea of faith and wisdom and the sea of rebellion and passion, and God by His Grace placed a barrier between them, a barrier (ḥājiz, also spoken of in 25:53 and 55:19, though in those two verses the term used for the barrier is barzakh) that is maintained as long as the soul is not insolent and rebellious toward God (R). He Who . . . made rivers to run through it is similar to 18:33: We made a stream gush forth in their midst. On the concept of firm mountains (rawāsī), see 21:30–31c.

***

62 He, Who answers the one in distress when he calls upon Him and removes the evil, and Who makes you vicegerents of the earth? Is there a god alongside God? Little do you reflect!

62 Evil here means harm (Ṭ). One in distress refers to one who is helpless and powerless (Q), in the sense of being in a bad situation through no choice of one’s own, perhaps afflicted by poverty or sickness (R). Al-Qurṭubī quotes a ḥadīth connecting the one in distress to those who are wronged or oppressed: “Be mindful of the supplication of the oppressed, for there is no veil between it and God.” For some Sufis one in distress refers to those who have cut themselves off from attachment to everything but God and see no answer to their distress except for God. Others say that this phrase refers to those who raise their hands in prayer to God, but who have not a single good deed to present to Him. Such people have only their past sins to show God and cannot approach God with an attitude of merit; yet their prayers are answered by God’s pure Generosity, meaning that those who come with awareness of their complete helplessness before God will find their prayers answered no matter what their actions might have been and will have the heart’s evils removed (Aj). On the meaning of vicegerents, see 6:165c.

***

63 He, Who guides you in the darkness of land and sea, and sends the winds as glad tidings ahead of His Mercy? Is
there a god alongside God? Exalted is God above the partners they ascribe!

63 The darkness of the sea and land (cf. 6:63, 97) can be taken both in the literal sense of physical danger and as a symbol of the spiritual journey. Here it also suggests a wilderness without guideposts or signs to show the way (Q). Regarding winds as glad tidings ahead of His Mercy, referring to the gathering of a rainstorm before the water starts to fall, see 7:57c; 25:48c. Winds as signs of God and blessings are also mentioned in 2:164; 7:57; 15:22; 30:46; 45:5.

***

64 He, Who brings creation into being, then brings it back, and Who provides for you from Heaven and the earth? Is there a god alongside God? Say, “Bring your proof, if you are truthful.”

64 Brings creation into being, then brings it back (cf. 10:4; 30:11, 27) is understood to encompass all of the other blessings that God provides from Heaven and earth (R). The message of the prophets is not only that God begins everything, which even many idolaters accepted (see 39:3c; 46:28c), but also that all things will return to Him; the Origin indicates and points to the Return (R), evoking 57:3: He is the First, and the Last, and the Outward, and the Inward. For some, the provisions from Heaven and the earth refer to the spiritual and material blessings, respectively, that God bestows (Aj).

***

65 Say, “None in the heavens or on the earth know the Unseen, save God. And they are not aware of when they will be resurrected.”

65 In the Quran Unseen (ghayb) refers to what is invisible in the sense of belonging to another order of reality, not something that is too distant or hidden to see physically, but it can also refer to events that are unknowable because they are in the remote past or have yet to occur, such as when they will be resurrected; on ghayb, also see 6:59c; 9:94c. God is described several times as Knower of the
Unseen and the seen (shahādah), which could also be translated “Knower of what is absent and what is present” (6:73; 9:94, 105; 13:9; 23:92; 32:6; 39:46; 59:22; 62:8; 64:18; see also 59:22c). Some say this verse was revealed when the idolaters asked the Prophet to tell them when the Day of Resurrection would come (Q).

Nay, but does their knowledge reach to the Hereafter? Nay, but they are in doubt concerning it; indeed, they are blind to it.

Nay, but does their knowledge reach \( bal \) iddāraka, which has several different readings (R) depending on how the consonants are vocalized. The translation reflects a reading of the verb as an interrogative, an alternate translation of which would be, “Or, does their knowledge reach to the Hereafter?” as a form of reproach. Another reading makes it a declarative statement, “Their knowledge reaches the Hereafter,” in the sense that they will come to possess knowledge in the Hereafter after it is too late for such knowledge to do them any good (T). If \( iddāraka \) is read as a contraction of the verb \( tadāraka \) (such contractions occur in Arabic when letters whose pronunciation is close are blended together), it would mean something like, “Their knowledge is completed in the Hereafter” (Q, R).

And those who disbelieve say, “What? When we and our fathers are dust, shall we indeed be brought forth?

This rhetorical question frequently comes from the opponents of prophets (e.g., 13:5; 17:49; 23:35, 82; 37:16; 56:47) and implies rejection of the notion of bodily resurrection in the Hereafter. Brought forth can mean something like “taken out,” that is, taken out of the grave. Al-Rāzī notes that doubt in the reality of the Hereafter stems from doubt about the Power of God, which is in a sense a failure of ordinary human imagination, which the Quran also mentions in 36:81: Is not He Who created the heavens and the earth able to create the like thereof? Yea, indeed, He is the knowing Creator. Some Sufis say that as one’s knowledge of God increases, one’s apprehension of certain unseen and mysterious realities increases as well (Aj), which is a way of saying that to the degree that one is truly detached from the world, one begins to see beyond it.
Indeed, we were promised this, we and our fathers, before. This is naught but fables of those of old!”

The often repeated idea in the Quran of the dismissal of prophetic messages as *fables of those of old* (cf. 6:25; 8:31; 23:83; 25:5; 46:17; 68:15) is comparable to calling them legends or old wives’ tales; see 25:4–5c.

Say, “Journey upon the earth and behold how the guilty fared in the end!”

On the Quran’s retort and challenge (e.g., 12:109; 30:9, 42; 35:44; 40:21, 82; 47:10) to travel the earth to see the vestiges of the peoples who denied their prophets (T) in ruin, see 7:84c; 30:9c. By *behold* some understand observe with one’s heart and one’s insight (Q).

And grieve not for them, and be not distressed by what they plot.

The Quran offers consolation to the Prophet elsewhere (5:68; 15:97; 16:127; 18:6; 26:3; 35:8), instructing him, among other things, not to be saddened by the failure of his people to embrace his mission, but to entrust their souls to God. *Distressed* renders *dayyiq*, which has the sense of contraction or constriction.

And they say, “When will this promise come to pass, if you are truthful?”

Say, “It may be that some of what you seek to hasten is close behind you.”

72. *Is close behind* means “has come near” (T), but also has the sense of following in someone’s footsteps (Q). Some interpret what is closing in upon them to be their defeat at the Battle of Badr (R), which occurred within a few years of the revelation of this sūrah; it is quite common among commentators for such warnings of impending punishment to be interpreted as references to the Battle of Badr.

And truly thy Lord is Possessed of Bounty toward mankind, but most of them do not give thanks.

73. God is also described as *Possessed of Bounty* (*dhū faḍl*) in 2:243, 251; 40:61. That most human beings are not sufficiently grateful to God is mentioned in 2:243; 7:10, 17; 10:60; 12:38; 23:78; 32:9; 40:61; 67:23.

And surely thy Lord knows that which their breasts conceal and that which they disclose.

74. Cf. 28:69. The concealing of thoughts and intentions within breasts (*ṣudūr*) is an important idea in the Quran and is frequently discussed in the context of God’s Knowledge of *what lies within breasts* (e.g., 3:119; 5:7; 8:43; 11:5; 29:10; 31:23; 39:7; 40:19; 42:24; 57:6; 64:4; 67:13; 100:10).

And there is nothing hidden in Heaven or on the earth, but that it is in a clear Book.

75. *Hidden* renders *ghā’ibah*, related to *ghayb* (“Unseen”). The *clear Book*
refers to the *Mother of the Book* (Ṭ), mentioned in 3:7 and 43:4.

***

76 Verily, this Quran recounts unto the Children of Israel most of that wherein they differ,

That wherein they differ is what the Israelites themselves disagree about (R, Ṭ), to the point of disparaging and cursing one another about it, regarding such matters as what they and the Christians “distorted” (*taḥrīf*; see 2:75c) in the Torah and the Gospel (R) and the obligations of the Divine Law (Q); on this latter question, see 3:50–51c. This verse is also interpreted in a more general way to mean that the Quran provides universal answers regarding the Nature of God.

***

77 and verily it is a guidance and a mercy for the believers.

The coupling of *a guidance and a mercy* for the Quran or the Torah also appears in 6:154, 157; 7:203; 10:57; 16:64, 89.

***

78 Verily thy Lord shall judge between them by His Judgment, and He is the Mighty, the Knowing.

Thy Lord shall judge between them; that is, God will judge in the Hereafter about who is right (Q, Ṭ), and it is not the duty of the Prophet to carry out this judgment (R). This verse is also related to the idea that God will, in the Hereafter, *inform you of that wherein you differed*, referring to God’s Judgment or disclosure of the truth in matters of religious disagreement on the Day of Judgment, mentioned in 2:113; 5:48; 6:164; 10:93; 16:39; 16:124; 22:69; 32:25; 39:3, 46.

***

79 So trust in God; truly thou standest upon the manifest truth.
Regarding the virtue of trust in God (tawakkul), see 3:122, 160; 5:11; 9:51; 12:67; 14:11–12; 39:38; 58:10; 64:13. Thou standest upon could also be rendered, “Thou followest” or “Thou art based upon.” Manifest truth could also be rendered “clear truth.”

***

Surely thou dost not make the dead hear; nor dost thou make the deaf hear the call when they turn their backs;

nor canst thou guide the blind away from their error. Thou canst only make hear those who believe in Our signs and are submitters.

Those whose heart God has sealed cannot be made to understand the truth, and those God has made deaf cannot then be made to hear ( تعالى). These verses echo similar imagery used throughout the Quran for those who are spiritually blind and deaf (e.g., 2:17–18; 5:71; 6:25; 6:39; 10:42–43), such as 22:46: Have they not journeyed upon the earth, that they might have hearts by which to understand or ears by which to hear? Truly it is not the eyes that go blind, but it is hearts within breasts that go blind; also see 2:7c. Al-Râzî interprets these verses as helping the Prophet’s heart to actualize trust in God and to become stronger thereby, arguing that when one hopes to get something from others, it weakens one’s ability to manifest opposition to them; by absolving the Prophet of any responsibility or power over whether his people believe or disbelieve, God strengthens the Prophet’s ability to declare and teach the truth.

***

And when the Word comes upon them, We shall bring forth for them a beast from the earth who will speak to them of how mankind was not certain of Our signs.

Some connect the Word comes upon them with similar language about the Word “coming due” (e.g., 10:96; 28:63; 36:7, 70; 39:71; 40:6), which connotes the coming of Divine Judgment ( تعالى); see 10:33c; 36:7c. For others the Word signifies that it is necessary for God’s Wrath to come upon them (Q, تعالى).
Beast renders dābbah (sometimes translated creature; cf. 2:164; 6:38; 11:6, 56; 16:49, 61; 24:45; 29:60; 31:10; 34:14; 35:45; 42:29; 45:4), a word whose most general meaning is anything that crawls or walks upon the earth (including human beings); it can often have the special sense of an animal that serves as a mount, but it can also include insects and sea animals that crawl. It is said the beast will come upon people at a time when no one any longer “enjoins what is right and forbids what is wrong” (see 3:104c; Ṭ). Various aḥādīth are mentioned in connection with this beast, which is considered one of the signs of the impending end of the world and the Day of Resurrection: “There are three things that, when they come, no soul’s belief will avail it, if they did not believe before, or if their belief earned them no good: the rising of the sun from the west, the Dajjāl, and the beast of the earth.” See also the essay “Death, Dying, and the Afterlife in the Quran.”

For some, the beast is enormous in size, sixty (R) or seventy cubits long (IK, Th). Others say it will emerge with the staff of Moses and the seal of Solomon, touch the face of the believers with the staff, and stamp the face of the disbelievers with the seal, so that anyone seeing a person will be able to say, “This is a believer, or this is a disbeliever” (IK, Q, Ṭ).

Other accounts describe the beast as being made up of parts of different ordinary animals on earth, with the head of a bull, the eyes of a pig, the trunk of an elephant, the horns of a stag, the torso of a lion, the markings of a tiger, the haunches of a cat, the tail of a ram, and the legs of a camel; this composite beast will be twelve cubits long. It will come out with the staff and the seal. When it touches the face of the believer, a white spot will appear that will grow to cover the believer’s face, and when it touches the face of the disbeliever with the seal, the same will occur with a black spot. It will then say to people, “O so-and-so, you are one of the people of the Garden, and so-and-so, you are one of the people of the Fire” (Th). Others give it the face of a man and the body of a bird or mention that its feet will be on the ground, but its head will be in the clouds (IK). According to some Sufis, the form of the beast in these accounts, which encompasses so many animal forms in paradoxical and fantastical ways, symbolizes a “universal nature” that bears, as it were, all worldly realities within it; it is a manifestation of that intermediate world (barzakh) between bodies and spirits where certain kinds of opposites can exist together, and it will unlock mysteries and provide insight to those who possess depth of spiritual vision (IḤ). At another level, some say that the beast is an ignorant spiritual master whom one encounters when one has been spiritually veiled from the truth and through whom God punishes those whom He chooses to punish by miring them in the psychic veiling and ignorance that comes from following a fool (Aj).

Some report that speak to them (tukallimuhum) can be understood to mean “wound them” (taklimuhum; Q, R). Others say the beast will actually be a human being (Q), though this is not a widely held position. Most commentators believe
that mankind was not certain of Our signs will be spoken or conveyed by the beast (Z).

There is a great deal of disagreement regarding the attributes of this beast and whence it will come (Q). For some, it is said the beast will come forth from Makkah, specifically from Minā (one of the sites of the rites of ḥajj), or that it will arise three times: from Yemen, from the desert, and then from Makkah. Some point out that since there is no clear indication of any of these details in the Quran, one should accept a report only insofar as it can be authenticated as from the Prophet, but otherwise one should pay no attention to such details (R).

***

83 And on that Day We shall gather from every community a group of those who denied Our signs, and they shall be marshaled [in ordered ranks],

83 As when used in connection with Solomon’s hosts in v. 17, marshaled can mean to corral or group together (T).

***

84 till, when they come, He will say, “Did you deny My signs, though you encompassed them not in knowledge? What is it that you used to do?”

84 Encompassed them not in knowledge is interpreted to mean that the disbelievers did not know or recognize the signs as they deserved to be known (T).

***

85 And the Word will come upon them for their having done wrong, and they shall not speak.

85 The wrong that the disbelievers have done was their denial of the truth and rejection of God’s Revelation (T). They shall not speak means they will not be able to defend themselves (T). The notion that the wretched will or will not be able to speak in the Hereafter to God is discussed in the commentary on 2:174, God will
not speak to them on the Day of Resurrection (cf. 3:77), which describes how not being able to speak with God is a form of punishment.

***

Have they not considered that We made the night that they might rest therein, and the day by which to see? Truly in that are signs for a people who believe.

86  Cf. 10:67; 17:12; 25:47; 40:61. That God created the night for rest and repose is also invoked in 28:73 and 78:9. The symbolism and significance of the night and day is brought up in several ways in the Quran, as when it mentions the night and day passing into one another (3:27; 22:61; 31:29; 35:13; 57:6), and the alternation of the night and the day (2:164; 3:190; 10:6; 13:3; 17:12; 22:61; 24:44; 31:29; 35:13; 39:5; 45:5). For the relationship between night and day, see 10:6c; 17:12c.

***

And on that Day the trumpet will be blown, and whosoever is in the heavens and on the earth will be terrified, save whom God wills, and all will come to Him in abject humility.

87  Some read this verse as, “[Remember] the Day when the trumpet will be blown” (Q). Regarding the blowing of the trumpet (by Seraphiel, or Isrāfīl in Arabic), one of the major eschatological events signaling the coming of the Final Judgment according to the Quran, see 6:73c; 18:99; 20:102; 23:101; 36:51; 39:68c; 50:20; 69:13; 74:8; 78:18. Some mention that this terrifying blowing of the trumpet will be the first of three; the second will cause all to swoon, and the third will bring about the Resurrection (Ṭ). Others, however, think that the trumpet will only be blown twice, because the one mentioned in this verse is the same as the one causing swooning mentioned in 39:68: And the trumpet will be blown, whereupon whosoever is in the heavens and on the earth will swoon, save those whom God wills (Q). Although many interpret trumpet (ṣūr) to be something like a “horn” (qarn), it could also be interpreted as an army being mustered by a trumpeter to symbolize the raising of the dead (R). Some read ṣūr as ṣuwwar, the plural of ṣūrah, or “form,” meaning that the blowing would be the blowing of spirit into the forms
or bodies to resurrect them (R).

*Be terrified* renders the verb *faziʿa*, which can also have the meaning of responding to a summons with alacrity and hence would describe the way in which those who are resurrected emerge from the graves (Q).

*Save whom God wills* is thought by some to refer to those who were slain in the way of God as mentioned in 3:169, which describes them as alive with their Lord, provided for; they are exempt from the terror that will affect those alive in the world (Ṭ). For others this exception refers to certain angels, or specifically to Gabriel, Michael, Seraphiel, and the Angel of Death, or ʿIzrāʾīl (Azrael; Q), and may also include the prophets and saints (Aj). Others are saved from this terror as described in v. 89. The terror of the end of the world is also mentioned in other verses, such as 70:11: The guilty would wish to ransom himself from the punishment of that Day at the price of his children; 79:8: Hearts that Day shall tremble; and 80:34: That Day when a man will flee from his brother. The manner in which human beings are brought before God is also mentioned in 19:95: And each of them shall come unto Him on the Day of Resurrection, alone.

***

88 And thou seest the mountains that thou dost suppose are solid pass away like clouds—the Work of God, Who perfects all things. Truly He is Aware of whatsoever you do.

88 Some commentators interpret *pass away* as “move” and *thou dost suppose are solid* to mean that mountains move but we cannot see this movement, since large objects viewed from a distance, even if they are moving quickly, appear to be standing still (Q, R). Others interpret the whole phrase (*thou seest the mountains that thou dost suppose are solid pass away*) as referring to an event at the end of the world similar to the destruction or movement of mountains at the Hour spoken of in other verses (e.g., 18:47; 19:90; 20:105; 52:10; 56:5; 69:14; 70:9; 73:14; 77:10; 78:20; 81:3; 101:5; R). Some interpret *pass away* as a reference to the earth itself, meaning that the world, believed to be solid, is actually as ephemeral as a cloud (Q). Another interpretation is that this verse is an allegory for the spirit when it leaves the body at death and rises toward the Divine Throne (Q). It is said that when the famous Sufi Junayd al-Baghdādī was asked why he did not appear to have the same (visible) states and ecstasies as other Sufis, he responded by reciting this verse. *Perfects* renders *attqana, which some understand to mean to “tie down” or “make firm” (Ṭ) or which in this context means that God “ties together” things
according to His Wisdom (R).

***

89 Whosoever brings a good deed, he will have that which is better than it. And that Day they will be secure from terror.

90 And whosoever brings an evil deed, their faces shall be cast down into the Fire. Are you recompensed for aught save that which you used to do?

89–90 A good deed refers to testifying, “There is no god but God” and believing in Him (Q); al-Qurṭubī quotes a ḥadīth that states, “Lā ilāha illa’Llāh is the best of good things.” An evil deed refers to idolatry (Q, T). Which is better can mean many things, among them knowledge of God in this world, the vision of God in the Hereafter (R), or the Contentment of God (Q). It can also refer to the multiplication of good deeds as mentioned in 6:160: Whosoever brings a good deed shall have ten times the like thereof (Q). For some this verse implies that people of faith, if they are punished in the Hereafter, will not be punished forever (R). Some say that what is better refers to being secure from terror on that day (T).

The imagery of faces cast down into the Fire or afflicted by it also appears in 17:97; 18:29; 23:104; 33:66; 54:48. Here faces shall be cast down can refer to being cast in the Fire upside down as in 17:97 or dragged upon their faces as in 54:48. According to some the face, like the head or neck, can in idiomatic usage stand for the whole person, so that “their faces” means simply “they” (Q, R). For some the question Are you recompensed for aught save that which you used to do? can also be read as a description of what will be said to the people as they are cast down into the Fire (R).

***

91 Truly I am commanded to worship the Lord of this city, Who has made it sacred. And unto Him belong all things. And I am commanded to be among those who submit,

91 This city (balad) is thought to refer to Makkah, though God is the Lord of
all lands (Ṭ). It is mentioned specifically, because it is the home of the idolaters to whom the Prophet is preaching; it is a reminder of the blessings and benefits that accrue to them by virtue of being inhabitants of Makkah, where they are safe from attack (Ṭ). Made it sacred refers to the fact that people were forbidden to commit certain acts during the pilgrimage to Makkah, or it means that it is a safe place for people seeking sanctuary or refuge. Its trees were not to be cut or its animals hunted, prohibitions followed even by the Arabs of the time because of their abiding recognition of the sanctity of the Kaʿbah, the House of God built by Abraham, and its surroundings (Q, R); see also 3:97c; 5:97c; 29:67c. On those who submit (muslim; cf. 10:72), see also 2:128c; 3:52c; 3:85c; 3:110c; 5:3c; 5:111c; 22:78c.

***

92 and to recite the Quran. So whosoever is rightly guided, he is guided only for his own soul. And [as for] whosoever is astray, say, “Verily, I am but a warner.”

92 He is guided only for his own soul, or “for himself,” “for his own sake.” Similar verses that speak of human beings’ good deeds as benefitting themselves, but as of no benefit to God include 31:12; 39:41; 41:46; 45:15. Being but a warner is a description of the Prophet found throughout the Quran meaning that it is not his responsibility to compel anyone to believe (cf. 11:12; 34:46; 35:23; 38:65; 79:45).

***

93 And say, “Praise be to God! He will show you His signs, and you will know them.” And thy Lord is not heedless of what you do.

93 He will show . . . His signs, both within the soul and in the created order (Ṭ), echoes 41:53: We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within themselves till it becomes clear to them that it is the truth; and 51:20–21: And upon the earth are signs for those possessing certitude, and within your souls. Others see this as a warning to the disbelievers that they will see the signs of God, but only after it is too late, referring to the signs at the end of the world (R).