A late Makkansūrah, al-Nāziʿat was most likely revealed shortly before or after Sūrah 78, al-Nabaʾ. It takes its title from the first word of the sūrah. It is also known as al-Sāhirah, “The Wide Expanse,” after the reference in v. 14 to the wide expanse upon which all human beings are said to be gathered on the Day of Resurrection, and as al-Ṭāmmah, “The Calamity,” after the reference to the Day of Judgment as the Great Calamity in v. 34 (Āl).

The focus of this sūrah is upon the reality of the Day of Judgment, the Hour, and the Resurrection. Thus some say that it follows directly upon the first phrase of 78:40, Truly we have warned you of a punishment nigh (Aj). The first five verses present a series of oaths in which God swears by certain aspects of creation. According to commentators, when one makes an oath by a thing, it is to show its greatness or to express the magnitude of what is to follow in the sūrah, or both. It is said that God may swear an oath by anything He has created, but that it is not proper for human beings to swear by anything other than God. Vv. 6–14 recount the questions of those who do not believe in the Resurrection and reaffirm some of its attributes. The next section, vv. 15–26, is most likely the first account of the story of Moses and Pharaoh in the chronological order of revelation, likening Pharaoh’s disbelief to that of the Makkans idolaters. Vv. 27–33 then cite the wonders of creation as evidence of God’s ability to resurrect. The next section, vv. 34–41, returns to a description of the Day of Resurrection, contrasting the fate of the believers with
that of the disbelievers. The last five verses respond to the disbelievers who chided the Prophet for not knowing when the Hour would come.

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

1 By those that wrest violently, 2 by those that draw out quickly, 3 by those that glide serenely, 4 by those that race to the fore, outstripping, 5 and by those that govern affairs, 6 on the Day when the quaker quakes 7 and the successor follows upon it. 8 Hearts that Day shall tremble, 9 with eyes humbled. 10 They will say, “Are we to be restored as we were before? 11 What! When we have become decayed bones?” 12 They say, “This, then, would be a ruinous return!” 13 Yet it shall be but a single cry, 14 then, behold, they will be upon a wide expanse. 15 Hast thou heard tell of Moses, 16 when his Lord called out to him in the holy valley of Ṭuwā? 17 “Go unto Pharaoh! Truly he has rebelled! 18 And say, ‘Dost thou wish to be purified 19 and that I guide thee to thy Lord that thou mightest have fear?’” 20 Then he showed him the greatest sign. 21 But he denied and disobeyed. 22 Then turned his back, moving swiftly. 23 Then he gathered and proclaimed, 24 and said, “I am your lord most high.” 25 So God seized him with a punishment exemplary in the Hereafter and in this world. 26 Truly in that is a lesson for whosoever fears. 27 Are you more difficult to create or the sky that He has built? 28 He raised high its canopy and fashioned it, 29 darkened its night, and brought forth its day. 30 And after that He spread out the earth. 31 From it He brought forth
its water and its pastures, and the mountains He set firm, as sustenance for you and for your flocks. So when the Great Calamity befalls— a day when man shall remember that for which he endeavored, and Hellfire is made visible for one who sees— as for one who rebels and prefers the life of this world, truly Hellfire is the refuge. As for one who fears standing before his Lord and forbids the soul from caprice, truly the Garden is the refuge. They ask thee about the Hour, “When shall it set in?” What hast thou to do with mentioning it? Unto thy Lord is [knowledge of] the end thereof. Thou art but a warner for whosoever fears it. The Day they see it, it will be as if they had tarried but an evening or the morning thereof.

Commentary

1–5 Regarding the varying interpretations for these verses as referring to different types of angels, different modes of death, or different types and phases of stars and/or other celestial bodies, among other things, al-Tabarî says that they can be seen as a reference to all of these, for God is swearing by everything that exhibits the characteristics mentioned in these verses. Al-Râzî advises that we cannot say any of the interpretations are what is meant by God, but that we can say they are possible. He adds another interpretation in which these verses represent five phases in the return of the heart from what is other than God to God: “Those that wrest (al-nâziʿāt) are the spirits that move toward (tanzîʿu ilā) attachment to the most unfailing handhold [2:256; 31:22], or who are being wrested from the love of what is other than God. Those that draw out quickly (al-nâshiṭāt nashīṭ) means that, after the return from bodily things, [the spirits] take to striving and assuming the character traits of God with utter zeal (nishūṭ) and great strength. Those that glide serenely is then that, after striving, [the spirits] ‘glide’ in the
realm of sovereignty, such that they cross these oceans and swim therein. *Those that race to the fore, outstripping* is an allusion to the variegation of spirits in the degrees of their journeying unto God, and *those that govern affairs* is an allusion to the connection between the last levels of humanness and the first degrees of angelhood. So when the human spirits reach their farthest limit, which is the level of *outstripping*, they connect to the world of the angels, which is what is meant by *those that govern affairs*. So the first four are what is meant by *its oil would well-nigh shine forth* [24:35], and the fifth is the fire in His saying, *even if no fire had touched it* [24:35].”

1 *Those that wrest* are viewed by most as the angels who wrest the souls of disbelievers from the body (IK, Q, Ṭ, Z). They do so *violently* because the souls do not want to face the Judgment. Others see *those that wrest* as an allusion to the stars or to all celestial bodies (Q, Ṭ, Z).

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2 by those that draw out quickly,

2 This verse may be a reference to the angels who draw out the souls of believers who go willingly into the Hereafter (Q, Ṭ); though others say it could be another description of the difficulties confronted by disbelievers and hypocrites, because *nashiṭa*, here translated *draw out*, can also imply something that must be pulled out with great force (Q). Others say it refers to the stars as they travel from one horizon to the other; while according to others, vv. 1–2 refer to death itself (Q, Ṭ), where the soul’s exit from the body is violent for some and gentle for others.

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3 by those that glide serenely,

3 This verse is a reference to angels who descend with God’s nourishment, or to the stars, or to ships that sail gently upon the sea (Ṭ). When taken as a reference to angels, *glide serenely* could also be rendered “descend in the early morning.” Mujāhid viewed this as a third reference to death (R): v. 1 refers to the death of disbelievers; v. 2, to the death of believers; and v. 3, to the death of the elect among the believers.

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by those that race to the fore, outstripping,

4 This verse is a reference to either angels who race to Paradise with human souls, death, or the stars (Ṭ).

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and by those that govern affairs,

5 Most see this verse as a reference to the angels who have been charged with governing the affairs of this world (Q). Some say that it applies to all angels with such responsibilities, while others relate it to the responsibilities mentioned in vv. 1–4 (R); and others say it refers only to the Archangels Gabriel, Michael, Azrael, and Seraphiel (Q), each of whom is considered to be responsible for a particular domain. In another interpretation this verse is understood as a reference to the planets (Q), presumably in astrological terms.

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on the Day when the quaker quakes

and the successor follows upon it.

6–7 Some maintain that the quaker and the successor refer to the first and second blasts of the trumpet blown by the Archangel Seraphiel on the Day of Judgment (Q, R, Ṭ); see 39:68c; 78:18c. Some say the quaker refers to earth and the mountains, for it is a day on which the earth and the mountains shake (73:14), while the successor refers to Heaven and the planets (IK, R). Another opinion is that the quaker refers to the first “shaking” of the earth, and the successor to the second shaking when it is sundered and fades away (R). Others interpret the quaker as a reference to “the event” in which the earth quakes; and still others see it as a reference to the Hour (Q, Ṭ), which is said to “quake” (22:1). A minority interpret vv. 6–7 as an allusion to death itself and all that it entails (Q, Ṭ).

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Hearts that Day shall tremble,
8 Hearts shall tremble with fear (Q, Ṭ), as in 40:18: So warn them of the Day of the Imminent Event, when hearts will be in throats, choking in agony. Al-Rāzī interprets the fact that hearts is here indefinite in the Arabic as an indication that not all hearts tremble, only those of the disbelievers.

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9 with eyes humbled.

9 Cf. 68:43; and 70:44: Their eyes humbled, abasement shall overcome them.

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10 They will say, “Are we to be restored as we were before?

11 What! When we have become decayed bones?”

10–11 These verses contain a common objection made by those who do not believe in the Resurrection; cf. 17:49; and 17:98: They say, “What! When we are bones and dust, shall we indeed be resurrected as a new creation?”

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12 They say, “This, then, would be a ruinous return!”

12 This verse is the response of those who deny the Resurrection. It is understood to mean that they know that if this were the case, they would be ruined (Q, R).

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13 Yet it shall be but a single cry,

13 Judgment will come with a single cry; cf. 36:29; 36:49; 37:19; 38:15. See in particular 39:68, which maintains that there will be two cries of the trumpet. The present verse is then taken as a reference to the second cry, at which all human
beings will be gathered. The reference to a single cry is understood by some to mean that the gathering will occur almost instantly, for as other verses say, Our Command is naught but one, like the blinking of an eye (54:50); and The matter of the Hour is as the blinking of an eye, or nearer still (16:77; IK).

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14 then, behold, they will be upon a wide expanse.

14 Wide expanse is interpreted by some as a reference to the face of the earth (IK, Q). Others connect it to the open plain in 18:47 and the barren plain in 20:106 (IK), both of which are seen as allusions to the plain on which all of humanity will be gathered for the Day of Judgment. Still others believe that the wide expanse refers to a plain near Jerusalem, in the vicinity of Mt. Arīḥā, where some say the Resurrection will take place. Sāhirah, here translated wide expanse, could also mean that they are “awake” due to the intensity of their fear (R, Z).

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15 Hast thou heard tell of Moses,

15–25 For the full Quranic account of Moses, see 7:103–55; 10:75–93; 17:101–4; 20:9–97; 26:10–66; 27:7–14; 28:3–46; 40:23–45; 43:46–56; 44:17–31. This is most likely the first account of Moses in the chronological order of revelation. As it occurred early in the Makkan period, it would appear to assume some basic knowledge of the story of Moses among the Arabs. Here it is offered as an example for the Prophet and his followers of what will eventually become of unjust rulers, like those of Makkah.

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16 when his Lord called out to him in the holy valley of Ţuwā?

16 Cf. 20:12. Ţuwā is either a proper name for the valley said to lie just below Mt. Sinai, where Moses first heard the Voice of God (see 20:12–16), or a term derived from the verb tawā/tayya, “to roll up,” meaning that the valley is wrapped in sanctity or that it is sanctified twice (Q, Ţ).
“Go unto Pharaoh! Truly he has rebelled!

Cf. 20:24, 43.

And say, ‘Dost thou wish to be purified and that I guide thee to thy Lord that thou mightest have fear?’”

Just as the Prophet invited the tribe of Quraysh to Islam in a peaceful manner, Moses was instructed to first invite Pharaoh to follow God’s Revelation, as in 20:44: *Yet speak unto him gently, that haply he may remember or have fear.* It is a common Quranic theme that no community is punished for wrongdoing until it has been offered guidance, as indicated in 28:59: *And thy Lord never destroys towns until He sends a messenger to their mother city to recite unto them Our signs;* and 26:208: *And never did We destroy a town save that it had warners;* see also 6:131; 10:13; 15:4.

Then he showed him the greatest sign.

One account mentions *nine clear signs* (17:101), but does not state which is the greatest sign. Some say it is the staff that became a serpent (7:107; 20:66–17; 26:32, 44–45), the hand turned white (7:108; 26:33; 27:12), the parting of the sea (7:136; 10:90; 20:77–78; 26:63–66), or all of the miracles that Moses performed. For a comprehensive list of the “signs” associated with Moses, see 17:101c.

But he denied and disobeyed.
21 Even after Pharaoh’s sorcerers acknowledged the superiority of Moses and the veracity of the signs with which he had been sent, Pharaoh continued to deny, considering the staff turned serpent and the white hand mere sorcery (see 7:111–26c).

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22 Then turned his back, moving swiftly.

22 Some say that this verse indicates that Pharaoh turned and fled when he saw the greatest sign or the staff turned serpent (R). Others say it indicates that, upon realizing the power of Moses’ message, Pharaoh quickly moved to devise a plan against him (R).

***

23 Then he gathered and proclaimed,

23 Most say this verse indicates that Pharaoh gathered all the people to declare his sovereignty. Others relate this verse to 26:53: Then Pharaoh sent marshalers to the cities, in which case it refers to Pharaoh’s summoning his people to pursue the Israelites.

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24 and said, “I am your lord most high.”

24 According to several reports, Pharaoh first said, O notables! I know of no god for you other than myself (28:38), then I am your lord most high (R, T, Ts).

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25 So God seized him with a punishment exemplary in the Hereafter and in this world.

25 A punishment exemplary renders nakāl, which also indicates weakness and inability, evoking the sense that God rendered Pharaoh impotent in opposing Moses. As translated, this verse is a reference to punishment in this world and the
next, and many interpret the this-worldly punishment as the plagues sent upon his people and their drowning in the sea (cf. 20:78–79; 7:135–37). Some read this verse as “the punishment of the last and the first,” saying “the first” indicates the punishment for saying, *I know of no god for you other than myself*, and that “the last” is for saying, *I am your lord most high* (Q, T, Ṭs); others say “the first” is for denying Moses and “the last” is for saying, *I am your lord most high* (Q). In a well-known Sufi interpretation, Alāʾ al-Dawlā al-Simnānī (d. 787/1336) is said to have seen the soul of the famous Sufi martyr al-Ḥallāj in an exalted state. So he prayed to God, asking how it was that al-Ḥallāj’s soul was in a high Paradise (ʿIlliyyūn), though he had said, “I am the Real” (anā al-Ḥaqq), yet Pharaoh’s soul was in Hell because he had said, *I am your lord most high*. God answered that Pharaoh saw only himself and forgot God, while al-Ḥallāj saw only God and forgot himself.

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26 Truly in that is a lesson for whosoever fears.

27 Are you more difficult to create or the sky that He has built?

27 God’s ability to create, which some who opposed the Prophet did accept, is here cited as evidence that God would have no problem resurrecting human beings as He wills, as in 40:57: *Surely the creation of the heavens and the earth is greater than the creation of mankind. But most of mankind know not;* and 36:81: *Is not He Who created the heavens and the earth able to create the like thereof?*

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28 He raised high its canopy and fashioned it,

29 darkened its night, and brought forth its day.

30 And after that He spread out the earth.

28–30 These verses describe additional dimensions of creation, which demonstrate that God can create and resurrect as He will. *Its canopy* indicates the
highest level of the sky; fashioned it implies that it is whole with no fissures, cracks, or imperfections. For the perfection of the heavens, see 67:3–4c. Its day translates duḥāhā, which could also mean “its light,” “its morning brightness,” as in 93:1, or the morning, as in v. 46. For the full range of meanings for duḥā, see the introduction to Sūrah 93. The mention of the earth (v. 30) after the sky, night, and day indicates that the earth was created after the heavens had been established (Q).

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31 From it He brought forth its water and its pastures,

Its pastures is interpreted by some as an allusion to all plant life and by others as an allusion to everything eaten by human beings and animals.

***

32 and the mountains He set firm,

The firmness of the mountains is cited in many verses as a sign of God’s Omnipotence; see 13:3; 15:19; 16:15; 21:31; 31:10; 41:10; 50:7; 77:27; 21:20–31c.

***

33 as sustenance for you and for your flocks.

Cf. 80:32. God sustains all things and has made all things subservient to human beings (see 22:65; 31:20; 45:13). Human beings are thus God’s viceregent (see, e.g., 2:30; 6:165c; 35:39) and must remain thankful to God for sustenance, while sharing these resources with all of God’s creatures.

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34 So when the Great Calamity befalls—

Calamity translates tāmmah, which derives from the verb tamma, meaning “to be abundant” or “to rise over,” as would a flood, implying that the tāmmah is the greatest of all tremendous events, because its overabundance encompasses all things. Some take the Great Calamity as a reference to the second cry of the
trumpet (see 39:68c), at which all human beings and jinn are gathered; others take it as a reference to the Resurrection, because it surpasses and predominates over (yaṭimmu) all things (Q). It is also interpreted by some as a reference to the very moment when the people of Hell are led to Hell and the people of Paradise are led to Paradise. Some view the omission of a response to the conditional when (idhā) as an affirmation that what is to occur must occur (Q, Ṭs).

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35 a day when man shall remember that for which he endeavored,

35 All people will remember the good and evil that they have done, for even if they have forgotten some of their deeds while in this world, their deeds have all been recorded, as in 58:6: On the Day when God resurrects them all together, then informs them of that which they did. God has kept account of it while they have forgotten it (see also 10:21; 34:3; 36:12; 43:80; 45:29; 78:29; 99:6–8).

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36 and Hellfire is made visible for one who sees—

36 One who sees is understood by some as a reference to the disbelievers and by others as a reference to all human beings (Q, R). Others argue that it could not refer to the disbelievers, because the realities of the Hereafter can only be seen by those who have eyes, and the eyes of the disbelievers are covered (see 2:7; R).

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37 as for one who rebels

38 and prefers the life of this world,

39 truly Hellfire is the refuge.

37–39 Al-Rāzī interprets one who rebels to indicate corruption of the intellect, for all who know God know their own insignificance and would thus not incline to rebellion and arrogance. Prefers the life of this world is then taken to
indicate corruption in actions in accordance with the ḥadīth “The love of the world is the source of all error” (R). The two together are thus taken to indicate the greatest degree of corruption, the punishment for which is eternal. So Hellfire is the refuge for those who reach this level of corruption. Those who do not may still be punished, but Hellfire will not be their ultimate refuge (R). Many verses condemn those who prefer the life of this world over the life of the Hereafter, for the life of this world is naught but the enjoyment of delusion (3:185; 57:20), while the Hereafter is better and more enduring (87:17; cf., e.g., 6:32; 9:38; 14:3).

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40 As for one who fears standing before his Lord and forbids the soul from caprice,

truly the Garden is the refuge.

40–41 Cf. 55:46: And for one who fears standing before his Lord, there are two Gardens. Maqāma rabihi, translated standing before his Lord here and in 55:46, could also be translated, “the station of his Lord.” It indicates being aware of standing before God on the Day of Judgment and answering for all of one’s deeds. Al-Rāzī sees this fear of standing before his Lord as the exact opposite of one who rebelled in v. 37, for just as rebellion implies ignorance, fear implies knowledge, as in 35:28: Only those among His servants who know fear God. In the same way, one who forbids the soul from caprice is the opposite of one who prefers the life of this world, for just as rebellion is seen as connected to love of the world, the fear of God is seen as leading the soul to perform acts of obedience and good deeds. From a Quranic perspective, it is caprice that leads astray; one follows either God and His Messenger or caprice. For a discussion of the significance of caprice, see 45:23c.

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42 They ask thee about the Hour, “When shall it set in?”

42 This verse is said to refer to the idolaters of Makkah, who did not ask in order to be informed, but only to mock (Āl, Q). When shall it set in? (cf. 7:187) derives from a nautical metaphor meaning, “When shall it berth?” Some take the use of this metaphor to imply that it is near at hand (Q).
What hast thou to do with mentioning it?

This verse can be understood either as God’s telling the Prophet that he is not to speak of that of which he does not know, or as a reference to those who contended that the Prophet had no business mentioning the Hour, its signs, the Resurrection, and other things, if he did not know when they were to transpire. The former interpretation is supported by a report from 'Ā’ishah that the Prophet wanted to ask God about the moment when the Hour would come, and God said to him that he was asking for knowledge of something he had no right to know.

Unto thy Lord is [knowledge of] the end thereof.

Only God knows about the Hour, as in 7:187: They question thee about the Hour, when it will set in. Say, “Knowledge thereof lies only with my Lord. None save He shall manifest it at its proper time. Heavy shall it weigh upon the heavens and the earth. It shall not come upon you but suddenly.” They question thee as if thou knew it well. Say, “Knowledge thereof lies only with God, but most of mankind know not” (cf. 30:34). Thus when the Prophet was asked about the Hour by the Archangel Gabriel, he responded, “Regarding that the one questioned knows no more than the questioner” (IK).

Thou art but a warner for whosoever fears it.

Cf. 36:11. The Prophet has no knowledge of the Hour and other aspects of the Unseen (see 38:69–70c), for he is only sent to warn (13:7; 22:49; 27:92; 29:50; 34:46; 35:23; 38:70; 46:9; 67:26). That prophets warn and bring glad tidings is reiterated throughout the Quran (see, e.g., 18:56), yet human beings often expect them to function as soothsayers or fortune-tellers. Thus in 46:9 the Prophet is instructed: Say, “I am no innovation among the messengers, and I know not what will be done with me or with you. I only follow that which has been revealed unto me, and I am naught but a clear warner.”
The Day they see it, it will be as if they had tarried but an evening or the morning thereof.

46 Cf. 10:45; 17:52; 20:103–4; 23:112–14; 30:55; 46:35. Most commentators say that this verse means that the time in the grave will seem short before the Day of Judgment, when all souls are gathered before God upon being resurrected. Others say the implication is that life on earth will seem as if it were only an hour in comparison to the experience of the Hereafter (IK, Q); see also 46:35 and the essay “Death, Dying, and the Afterlife in the Quran.” In this instance, morning (ḍuḥā) is said to refer to the time period of the worldly life in the eyes of the people when they see the Hereafter (IK). For the broader meaning of ḍuḥā, see the introduction to Sūrah 93.