The Slanderer

Al-Humazah

Al-Humazah is an early Makkan sūrah, most likely revealed after Sūrah 75, al-Qiyāmah. It takes its title from the condemnation of every slandering backbiter in the first line. It was reportedly revealed regarding a man by the name of al-Akhnas ibn Shurayq (Q, Z), who was known to slander people both to their faces and behind their backs. According to others it was revealed in relation to al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah (Q, Ṭ, Z), one of the leaders of the Quraysh who was openly hostile toward the Prophet, slandering him to his face and in his absence. Others say that it is a general condemnation, not one revealed in relation to any specific person or instance (Ṭ), although it is permissible to view something revealed in relation to a specific instance as having a general application (Z). Like several other Quranic passages, the nine verses of this sūrah focus upon the torment that awaits one who spends the life of this world hoarding wealth.

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

1. Woe unto every slandering backbiter who amasses wealth and tallies it, supposing that his wealth makes him immortal. 2. Nay! He shall surely be cast into the crushing Fire. 3. And what shall apprise thee of the crushing Fire? 4. The Fire of God, ignited, which
engulfs hearts. Truly it is enclosed upon them in pillars outstretched.

Commentary

1 Woe unto every slandering backbiter

Woe translates wayl, which indicates that punishment or destruction will befall them (Sh), and is taken by some as the name of a valley in Hell (T), in which case the verse could be rendered, “[The valley of] Wayl is for every slandering backbiter” (see 2:79c). According to Mujāhid, humazah, here translated slandering, refers to harm done to others with one’s hands and eyes, while lumazah, here translated backbiter, refers to harm done with one’s tongue (IK). According to others, humazah indicates any form of calumny, while lumazah indicates verbal reproach and accusation (T). Yet others maintain the opposite, stating that lumazah literally means to eat the flesh of others (T; regarding backbiting, see 49:12). Despite the different interpretations, all point to the moral decrepitude of those who slander others whether in public or in private. It can also be taken as a more general rebuke to any who are more concerned with the faults of others than with their own (Aj).

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2 who amasses wealth and tallies it,

3 supposing that his wealth makes him immortal.

For a similar statement see 70:18. The punishment for those who hoard is most vividly described in 9:34–35: [As for] those who hoard gold and silver and spend it not in the way of God, give them glad tidings of a painful punishment, on the Day when it will be heated in the Fire of Hell, and their foreheads, their sides, and their backs will be branded with it. “This is what you hoarded up for yourselves; so taste that which you hoarded.”

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4 Nay! He shall surely be cast into the crushing Fire.
And what shall apprise thee of the crushing Fire?

The Fire of God, ignited,

4–6 *The crushing Fire* (al-ḥuṭamah) is one of the descriptive names of Hell indicating that it crushes everything that enters it. It derives from the verb ḥaṭama, meaning “to break, shatter, smash, or crush.”

which engulfs hearts.

7 *Hearts* translates ʾafidah, which is said to indicate the very center of the heart, the subtlest faculty of the human being, which feels pain and suffering most severely (Z). This verse indicates both that the fire touches the very core of one’s being, thus consuming all that one is, and that it is more painful than any burning experienced in this world.

Truly it is enclosed upon them

in pillars outstretched.

8–9 These verses are taken by most as an allusion to the closing of the doors of Hell upon the disbelievers, as in 90:20: *Upon them is a Fire enclosed.* Enclosed translates muʾṣadah, which can also mean “covered.” The pillars are the pillars of the Fire, similar to 18:29: *Verily We have prepared for the wrongdoers a Fire whose canopies will encompass them* (Qu). V. 9 could also be translated, “as pillars outstretched.”