

Taraveeh: Seventeenth Night

Surah Al-Ankabut

In the name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful.

Name

The Surah takes its name from verse 41 in which the word Ankabut (Spider) has occurred.

Period of Revelation

Verses 56 to 60 clearly show that this Surah was sent down a little before the migration to Habash, and this is supported by the internal evidence of the subject matter as well. Some commentators have opined that since it mentions the hypocrites, and hypocrisy appeared in Madinah, the first ten verses of this Surah were revealed at Madinah and the rest of it at Makkah; whereas the people whose hypocrisy has been mentioned here are those

who had adopted a hypocritical way of life because they were afraid of the oppression and extreme physical torture to which the Muslims were being subjected by the disbelievers. Evidently, this kind of hypocrisy could be there only at Makkah and not at Madinah. Similarly, some other commentators, seeing that in this Surah the Muslims have been exhorted to migrate, have regarded it as the last Surah to be revealed at Makkah, whereas the Muslims had migrated to Habash even before their migration to Madinah. These opinions are not based on any tradition but on the internal evidence of the subject matter, and this internal evidence, when considered against the subject matter of the Surah as a whole, points to the conditions prevailing in the time of the migration to Habash and not to the last stage at Makkah.

Theme and Subject matter

A perusal of the Surah shows that the period of its revelation was the period of extreme persecution of the Muslims at Makkah. The disbelievers were opposing and fighting Islam tooth and nail and the new converts were being subjected to the severest oppression. Such were the conditions when Allah sent down this Surah to strengthen and encourage the sincere Muslims as well as to put to shame those who were showing weakness of the faith. Besides, the disbelievers of Makkah have been threatened and warned not to invite for themselves the fate that the antagonists of the Truth have been experiencing in every age.

In this connection, the questions that some young men answered. For instance, their parents were urging them to abandon Muhammad (may Allah's peace be upon him), and return to their ancestral religion, for they argued: "The Qur'an in which you have put your faith, regards the rights of the parents as the uppermost; therefore, listen to what we say; otherwise you will be working against the dictates of your own Faith." This has been answered in verse 8.

Similarly, the people of some clans said to the new converts to Islam, "Leave the question of punishments etc., to us. Listen to us and abandon this man. If God seizes you in the Hereafter, we will come forward and say, 'Lord, these people are innocent: we had forced them to give up the Faith; therefore, seize us'." This has been dealt with, in vv. 12-13.

The stories mentioned in this Surah also impress the same point mostly, as if to say, "Look at the Prophets of the past: they were made to suffer great hardships and were treated cruelly for long periods. Then, at last they were helped by Allah. Therefore, take heart: Allah's succor will certainly come. But a period of trial and tribulation has to be undergone." Besides teaching this lesson to the Muslims, the disbelievers also have been warned, as if to say, "If you are not being immediately seized by Allah, you should not form the wrong impression that you will never be seized. The signs of the doomed nations of the past are before you. Just see how they met their doom and how Allah succored the Prophets."

Then the Muslims have been instructed to the effect: "If you feel that the persecution has become unbearable for you, you should give up your homes, instead of giving up your Faith: Allah's earth is vast: seek a new place where you can worship Allah with the full peace of mind." Besides all this, the disbelievers also have been urged to understand Islam. The realities of Tauhid and the Hereafter have been impressed with rational arguments, shirk have been refuted, and drawing their attention towards the signs in the universe, they have been told that all these Signs confirm the teachings that the Prophet is presenting before them.

Surah Ar-Rum

In the name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful.

Name

The Surah takes its name Ar-Rum from the second verse in which the words ghulibat-ur-Rum have occurred.

Period of Revelation

The period of the revelation of this Surah is determined absolutely by the historical event that has been mentioned at the outset. It says: "The Romans have been vanquished in the neighboring land." In those days the Byzantine occupied territories adjacent to Arabia were Jordan, Syria and Palestine, and in these territories the Romans were completely overpowered by the Iranians in 615 A. D. Therefore, it can be said with absolute certainty that this Surah was sent down in the same year, and this was the year in which the migration to Habash took place.

Historical Background

The prediction made in the initial verses of this Surah is one of the most outstanding evidences of the Quran's being the Word of Allah and the Holy Prophet Muhammad's being a true Messenger of Allah. Let us have a look at the historical background relevant to the verses.

Eight years before the Holy Prophet's advent as a Prophet the Byzantine Emperor Maurice was overthrown by Phocus, who captured the throne and became king. Phocus first got the Emperor's five sons executed in front of him, and then got the Emperor also killed and hung their heads in a thoroughfare in Constantinople. A few days after this he had the empress and her three daughters also put to death. The event provided Khusrau Parvez, the Sassanid king of Iran; a good moral excuse to attack Byzantium. For Emperor Maurice had been his benefactor; with his help he had got the throne of Iran. Therefore, he declared that he would avenge his godfather's and his children's murder upon Phocus, the usurper. So, he

started war against Byzantium in 603 A. D. and within a few years, putting the Phocus armies to routine succession, he reached Edessa (modern, Urfa) in Asia Minor, on the one hand, and Aleppo and Antioch in Syria, on the other. When the Byzantine ministers saw that Phocus could not save the country, they sought the African governor's help, who sent his son, Heraclius, to Constantinople with a strong fleet. Phocus was immediately deposed and Heraclius made emperor. He treated Phocus as he had treated Maurice. This happened in 610 A. D., the year the Holy Prophet was appointed to Prophet hood.

The moral excuse for which Khusrau Parvez had started the war was no more valid after the deposition and death of Phocus. Had the object of his war really been to avenge the murder of his ally on Phocus for his cruelty, he would have come to terms with the new Emperor after the death of Phocus. But he continued the war, and gave it the color of a crusade between Zoroastrianism and Christianity. The sympathies of the Christian sects (i. e. Nestorians and Jacobians etc.) which had been excommunicated by the Roman ecclesiastical authority and tyrannized for years also went with the Magian (Zoroastrian) invaders, and the Jews also joined hands with them; so much so that the number of the Jews who enlisted in Khusrau's army rose up to 26,000.

Heraclius could not stop this storm. The very first news that he received from the East after ascending the throne was that of the Iranian occupation of Antioch. After this Damascus fell in 613 A. D. Then in 614 A.D. the Iranians occupying Jerusalem played havoc with the Christian world. Ninety thousand Christians were massacred and the Holy Sepulcher was desecrated. The Original Cross on which, according to the Christian belief, Jesus had died was seized and carried to Mada'in. The chief priest Zacharia was taken prisoner and all the important churches of the city were destroyed. How puffed up was Khusrau Parvez at this victory can be judged from the letter that he wrote to Heraclius from Jerusalem. He wrote: "From Khusrau, the greatest of all gods, the master of the whole world : To

Heraclius, his most wretched and most stupid servant: 'You say that you have trust in your Lord, why didn't then your Lord save Jerusalem from me?'"

Within a year after this victory the Iranian armies over-ran Jordan, Palestine and the whole of the Sinai Peninsula, and reached the frontiers of Egypt. In those very days another conflict of a far greater historical consequence was going on in Makkah. The believers in One God, under the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad (may Allah's peace be upon him), were fighting for their existence against the followers of shirk under the command of the chiefs of the Quraish, and the conflict had reached such a stage that in 615 A. D., a substantial number of the Muslims had to leave their homes and take refuge with the Christian kingdom of Habash, which was an ally of the Byzantine Empire. In those days the Sassanid victories against Byzantium were the talk of the town, and the pagans of Makkah were delighted and were taunting the Muslims to the effect: "Look the fire worshipers of Iran are winning victories and the Christian believers in Revelation and Prophethood are being routed everywhere. Likewise, we, the idol worshipers of Arabia, will exterminate you and your religion."

These were the conditions when this Surah of the Quran was sent down, and init a prediction was made, saying:"The Romans have been vanquished in the neighboring land and within a few years after their defeat, they shall be victorious. And it will be the day when the believers will rejoice in the victory granted by Allah." It contained not one but two predictions: First, the Romans shall be Victorious; and second, the Muslims also shall win a victory at the same time. Apparently, there was not a remote chance of the fulfillment of the either prediction in the next few years. On the one hand, there were a handful of the Muslims, who were being beaten and tortured in Makkah, and even till eight years after this prediction there appeared no chance of their victory and domination. On the other, the Romans were losing more and more ground every next day. By 619 A. D. the whole of Egypt had passed into Sassanid hands and the

Magian armies had reached as far as Tripoli. In Asia Minor they beat and pushed back the Romans to Bosphorus, and in 617 A. D. they captured Chalcedon (modern, Kadikoy) just opposite Constantinople. The Emperor sent an envoy to Khusrau, praying that he was ready to have peace on any terms, but he replied, "I shall not give protection to the emperor until he is brought in chains before me and gives up obedience to his crucified god and adopts submission to the fire god." At last, the Emperor became so depressed by defeat that he decided to leave Constantinople and shift to Carthage (modern, Tunis). In short, as the British historian Gibbon says, even seven to eight years after this prediction of the Quran, the conditions were such that no one could even imagine that the Byzantine Empire would ever gain an upper hand over Iran. Not to speak of gaining domination, no one could hope that the Empire, under the circumstances, would even survive.

In 622 A. D. as the Holy Prophet migrated to Madinah, the Emperor Heraclius set off quietly for Trabzon from Constantinople via the Black Sea and started preparations to attack Iran from rear. For this he asked the Church for money and Pope Sergius lent him the Church collections on interest, in a bid to save Christianity from Zoroastrianism. Heraclius started his counter attack in 623 A. D. from Armenia. Next year, in 624 A. D., he entered Azerbaijan and destroyed Clorumia, the birthplace of Zoroaster, and ravaged the principal fire temple of Iran. Great are the powers of Allah, this was the very year when the Muslims achieved a decisive victory at Badr for the first time against the mushriks. Thus both the predictions made in Surah Rum were fulfilled simultaneously within the stipulated period of ten years.

The Byzantine forces continued to press the Iranians hard and in the decisive battle at Nineveh (627 A.D.) they dealt them the hardest blow. They captured the royal residence of Dastagerd, and then pressing forward reached right opposite to Ctesiphon, capital of Iran in those days. In 628 A. D. in an internal revolt, Khusrau Parvez was imprisoned and 18 of his sons

were executed in front of him and a few days later he himself died in the prison. This was the year when the peace treaty of Hudaibiya was concluded, which the Quran has termed as "the supreme victory", and in this very year Khusrau's son, Qubad II, gave up all the occupied Roman territories, restored the True Cross and made peace with Byzantium. In 628 A. D., the Emperor himself went to Jerusalem to install the "Holy Cross" in its place, and in the same year the Holy Prophet entered Makkah for the first time after the Hijrah to perform the 'Umra-tul-Qada'.

After this no one could have any doubt about the truth of the prophecy of the Quran, with the result that most of the Arab polytheists accepted Islam. The heirs of Ubayy bin Khalaf lost their bet and had to give a hundred camels to Hadrat Abu Bakr Siddiq. He took them before the Holy Prophet, who ordered that they be given away in charity, because the bet had been made at a time when gambling had not yet been forbidden by the Shari'ah; now it was forbidden. Therefore, the bet was allowed to be accepted from the belligerent disbelievers, but instruction given that it should be given away in charity and should not be brought in personal use.

Theme and Subject matter

The discourse begins with the theme that the Romans have been overcome and the people the world over think that the empire is about to collapse, but the fact is that within a few years the tables will be turned and the vanquished will again become victorious.

This introductory theme contains the great truth that man is accustomed to seeing only what is apparent and superficial. That which is behind the apparent and superficial he does not know. When in the petty matters of life, this habit to see only the apparent and superficial can lead man to misunderstandings and miscalculations, and when he is liable to make wrong estimates only due to lack of knowledge about "what will happen tomorrow", how stupendous will be his error if he risks his whole life-activity

by placing reliance only upon what is visible and apparent with respect to his worldly life as a whole.

Surah Luqman

In the name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful.

Name

The Surah has been named Luqman after Luqman the Sage, whose admonitions to his son have been related in vv. 12-19 of this Surah.

Period of Revelation

A perusal of the subject matter shows that it was sent down in the period when persecution to suppress and thwart the invitation to Islam had begun and every sort of machination had started being employed for the purpose. This is borne out by vv. 14,15, in which the young converts to Islam have been told that although the rights of the parents are the uppermost after God, they should not listen to them if they prevented them from accepting Islam, or compelled them to revert to the creed of shirk and polytheism. The same thing has been said in Surah Al-Ankabut, which indicates that both these Surahs were sent down in the same period. A study of the style and subject matter of the two Surahs on the whole, however, shows that Surah Luqman was sent down earlier, for one does not see any sign of the antagonism in its background though, contrary to this, while studying Surah Al-Ankabut one can clearly feel that the Muslims were being severely persecuted during the period of its revelation.

Theme and Subject matter

In this Surah the people have been made to understand the meaninglessness and absurdity of shirk and the truth and reasonableness of Tauhid, and they have been invited to give up blind imitation of their forefathers, consider with a cool mind the teachings which the Prophet Muhammad (upon whom be Allah's peace and blessings) is presenting from the Lord of the worlds, and see with open eyes the manifest Signs found in the universe around them and in their own selves, which bear evidence to its truth.

In this connection, it has also been pointed out that this is not a new teaching which might have been, presented in the world, or in the land of Arabia, for the first time, and with which the people might be unfamiliar. The learned and wise people of the past ages said and taught the same thing which Muhammad (upon whom be Allah's peace) is teaching today. It is as if to say, "O people: In your own country there has lived a wise man, named Luqman, whose wisdom has been well known among you, whose proverbs and wise sayings are cited in your daily conversation and who is often quoted by your poets and orators. Now you should see for yourselves what creed and what morals he used to teach."

