

Name and Background

The name of Soorah At-Teen (the Fig) is its first word, implying “The Soorah that starts with At-Teen.”

The theme of the Soorah is to help people rationally reflect on the best and worst of human potential and, as a consequence, accept the fact that Allaah SWT will judge people on the Day of Judgment as to how they used their potential and will reward or punish them accordingly.

The Soorah was revealed in the early years of the Islamic mission in Makkah when the emphasis of the mission was to propagate belief in the Day of Judgment and the Hereafter, which the Makkans lacked.

This is one of those Soorahs that begin with a series of oaths. Hence, it is useful to remind ourselves of the role of oaths in the Qur-aan.

Human beings take oaths to add credibility to the statements they make. Oaths fill the gaps left by a deficiency or lack of evidence. Usually the entities used for taking oaths are those that are considered sacred and exalted.

The Holy Qur-aan also uses oaths in its text. Many Soorahs start with some kind of oaths and some of them come within the text itself. We cannot, however, interpret the oaths of the Qur-aan from the same perspective as we do in the case of human oaths. Firstly, nothing is exalted or sacred to Allaah SWT. He is the Most Exalted and the Most Holy. Secondly, His word is ultimate. It does not require any support. However, people may not be able to grasp the meaning or the reality of Allaah’s words. They may need props to help them understand the message from the Words of Allaah. That is the sole purpose of the oaths in the Qur-aan.

The entities used in the Qur-aanic oaths are not special in their own nature. They are selected because they present the best evidence possible for human beings to grasp the message. So, the use of any items for an oath in the Qur-aan signifies that there is some logical relationship between the items in the oath and the statement that follows the oath. If we reflect and

fruits themselves have been used for the oath. That impression is not valid as it is inconsistent with verses two and three which are clearly talking about two geographic locations and it is a known style of the Qur-aan that whenever it uses a series of oaths, the items used for those multiple oaths are of the same kind. It was also a known practice in earlier generations of Jews and Arabs to name a place by the name of the produce most commonly and abundantly grown in that area. Thus, the Fig and the Olive in this verse do not mean the fruits themselves but the localities of their growth, or the mountains famous by the name of these fruits.

So what are the places that these oaths refer to? The Fig refers to the mountain where Adam and Hawwah (Eve) descended after their expulsion from Jannah, and where they covered their private parts with fig leaves{footnote}Genesis 3:1

{/footnote}. The Arabs knew it as the name of the place and one of their famous poets, Nabighah Zibyani, mentioned it as such in one of his verses. In Turkey, the land of figs (injeer), there is a mountain called Injeer Tepe (Mount Fig) which is located 73 km from Mount Judi where Nooh's (Noah's) Ark rested after the flood. Thus, Mount Fig is the area associated with Adam and Nooh, peace be upon them.

The Olive refers to Mount Olive in Jerusalem that was frequented by Prophet 'Eesa (Jesus){footnote}Luke 19:29, 37; 21:37 and 22:39. Also Matthew 21:1, 24:3 and 26:30

{/footnote}, peace be upon him (PBUH).

Mount Sinai obviously was the mountain where Moosa (Moses) PBUH talked to Allaah SWT, spent forty days in worship, received the commandments and where the Israelites made their covenant with Allaah SWT.

"This city of peace" refers to Makkah that was founded and inhabited by Ibraheem and Isma'eel, peace be upon them, and where they built the first house of worship for Allaah. It was because of this house that Makkah always remained peaceful and secure when the rest of Arabia was engulfed in the flames of violence. And it is also the city of the last messenger, Prophet Muhammad sall-Allaahu 'alayhi wa sallam himself.

These four places were presented to people so that they could understand their potential, their options and Allaah's system of reward and punishment for the choices they make.

To understand the impact of their evidence, it should be remembered that Allaah SWT pre-programmed all inanimate objects by His laws of nature so that they continue to function in a balanced manner, maintaining an equilibrium as desired by Allaah SWT. The living creatures are pre-programmed through instincts, in addition to the laws of nature. Thus they also sustain a balance among various creatures. Human beings and Jinns are the only exceptions who have been given freedom to make choices and decisions on their own which can be very different from instinctive behaviour.

Biologically, human beings are not much different from animals. So, what is the difference between people and animals? Yes, we have a physical shape that is more adaptable and flexible to give us an edge over other living organisms. And we can talk and communicate more expressively and eloquently than other creatures. Also, our intelligence is more developed and sophisticated than other species. These are important differences. They collectively give us much superiority over animals. But there are some much more profound and crucial differences that truly distinguish us from animals:

Animals react to a certain stimulus only as they have been pre-programmed through instincts. They cannot choose any response that is not instinctively programmed. For example, at the perception of danger, they cannot think beyond fight or flight, regardless of the amount of intelligence they can use in fighting or fleeing. Human beings have freedom of choice. They have the capability to intercept between the stimulus and instinctive response to choose between options. They can review the pros and cons of different responses, their personal objectives and preferences and the results they want to achieve and then choose a response that is most appropriate for their situation. They have myriad of choices and they can come up with imaginative new ways of handling situations.

Furthermore, human beings can look inwards at any time and review and assess what is going on in their mind and thought processes. In addition, they have an innate sense of right and wrong. When they look inside they can judge themselves on whether they are doing something good or something bad. They feel good when they find themselves doing the right thing and they feel guilty when they find themselves doing wrong. These elements of human psyche – the capability of reviewing one's own decisions, the ability to choose and change one's course of action, a concern about right and wrong, the process of self judgment and feelings about their behaviour – are all very pronounced, strong and well developed features that differentiate people from animals. Taken all together, they provide a tremendous potential for human beings to excel in morals and behaviour. Thus the God-given freedom allows them to do better than merely being just, equitable, and balanced. It allows them to be forgiving, magnanimous, outstanding and excellent.

The four places used for oaths present the evidence of that God-given human potential mentioned in the next verse.

وَمَا كُنَّا بِمُرْسِيْنَ
الْحَبْلَةِ الْاُولَىٰ
وَمَا كُنَّا بِمُرْسِيْنَ
الْحَبْلَةِ الْاُولَىٰ

4 We certainly have created man with the most excellent potential; 5 then We reduce him to the lowest of the low, 6 except for those who believe and do good deeds – for them there will be unending recompense.

This tremendous human potential is evidenced by the outstanding personalities of the messengers associated with these localities. These prophets -- Adam, Nooh, 'Eesa, Moosa, Ibraheem and Muḥammad, peace be upon all of them -- have been mentioned to provide vivid evidence of how excellent a person can become. By mentioning them, the Qur-aan has actually presented to us the whole chain of prophets from the first to the last, including all five of the top ranking messengers{footnote}Even in the order of their mention there is wisdom. Adam and Eesa, peace be upon them, have been put one after the other in order because of their similarity in their creation. Then, Moosa and Muhammad, peace be upon them, are together because of the very close similarity between the two, as mentioned in both the Bible and the Qur-aan. Nooḥ's relationship with Adam and Muhammad's strong relationship with Ibraheem is also indicated by associating each couple to the same place.

{/footnote}. They were the most outstanding people of their societies in terms of intelligence, status, personality, good qualities, commendable behaviour and moral excellence. They excelled in being kind, gracious, forgiving, sharing, fair, supportive of the weak, helpers of the helpless, restorers of human dignity, promoters of human equality, keepers of their word, truthful, honest, courageous, steadfast, firm, gentle and adorned with many other beautiful qualities. They have been presented to us as evidence of the potential of human beings, showing how much people can excel if they choose to do so.

If people follow the prophets and commit themselves to the pursuit of excellence in their behaviour, they will be better than angels: Angels are pre-programmed for obedience, so they

can do only what they are commanded, and only as they are commanded. They cannot do any better or worse than expected. When a Muslim chooses to excel and to perform better than expected, he is superior to angels firstly in choosing to be obedient despite having the freedom to disobey; and secondly by choosing to excel. This attitude results in the creation of the best of human societies, the one where everyone is treated equally with dignity, magnanimity, grace, love and care. However, if the Muslims do not pursue excellence, but only continue to live by the teachings of Islam, at a minimum, they will be able to maintain justice, fairness and resulting peace.

On the other hand, if people want to go the wrong way, they have the potential to become the worst of the worst. They can fall to the lowest of the low levels. In that case, they become far worse than animals. Animals only kill for food or in self defence if they feel threatened. People kill by planning to do so: for fun, for animosity, out of jealousy or simply arrogance. No animal ever collects and recruits armies to attack another group of their own species. People do. They invent hydrogen bombs and other weapons of mass destruction. They use such weapons and then have the nerve to call themselves civilized. Animals engage in sexual activity only with a willing partner. People rape and use rape as a weapon. It is used as an act of war where helpless innocent women of the perceived enemy are gang raped. To add insult to the torture, they are raped in front of their helpless relatives. They do not even spare innocent children. They are abused, murdered, maimed and used for sexual activities and pornography. Their vengeance is also unbridled. Murder is not enough to cool their anger, arrogance or vengeance. They mutilate and dismember people who are alive and disrespect the corpses of the dead. They force mothers to drink the blood of their children. They invent such techniques of physical, mental and psychological torture and persecution of fellow human beings that are indescribable. The atrocities against Muslims are legend. Just read about what the Christian Militia of Lebanon did, what Israelis do to Palestinians, what Indian Hindus do to Kashmiris, and what Serbs did to Bosnians and Kosovars. However, such crimes are not limited to non-Muslims, even so-called Muslim kings, generals and presidents who have abandoned Islam for other ideologies behave in a similar manner. In addition, there are also such deranged people who become serial killers and rapists and their victims are not even enemies but members of their own society. In politics, they lie, break promises and demonstrate the dirtiest demagoguery. In business, they cheat the most vulnerable of the people out of their meagre finances. When they deviate in matters of religion, they worship stones, trees, snakes, and even sexual organs. Or, in their sectarian madness, they kill people busy in worshipping Allaah SWT. In short, when people choose to stoop low, they prove to be horribly vicious.^{footnote}Some people take a totally different kind of meaning from this Soorah. They think the best form represents physical capabilities and lowest of the low refers to old age when a person is totally debilitated after the strength of youth. This meaning neither fits the context whatsoever nor does it make sense. If we consider it referring to the lifecycle of a person, then a child is not born in the best form. In that case, a human being is born in weakness and dies in weakness. Secondly, it is not that only non-Muslims grow old and Muslims stay young. These stages come to every human being, so how can they provide any evidence about reward and punishment? This meaning makes the question about Recompense totally out of place. Thirdly, the oaths in the beginning have no relationship to this meaning at all.

Because someone in the past has expressed this opinion does not mean that we accept the opinion of the previous scholars even if it does not make any sense. That is why all the major contemporary commentators of the Qur-aan do not accept this view.

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Although all people have the potential to be like prophets or like the worst kind of savages, those who believe and do good deeds are only the people who try to emulate the prophets and develop themselves in their good potential. They are motivated to excel in morals and ethics. Such people are usually fewer because doing good is not easy. It is like going uphill, which has its own risks and difficulties. It takes effort, resolve and constancy. On the other hand, going downhill is easy. You just let yourself roll and you will end up in the ditch. Just follow your temptations and submit to your lusts, and you will be rolling down fast. Hence, without faith in the Creator, without a desire to reach to the top, and without commitment to succeed in the life Hereafter, it is difficult to resist those temptations and deny those lusts. Only those who do so will be reaching the top. They will have a never-ending, uninterrupted reward in the life Hereafter.

There are also some incidents of Allaah's rewards and punishments attached to the four aforementioned places. Thus, they also serve to remind people of the consequences of the choices they make. The mountain with figs reminds us of Adam being expelled from Jannah because of his disobedience to Allaah as well as of the good news of the acceptance of his repentance. That area also reminds us how the rejecters of Nooh's message were destroyed while the Muslims were saved. They prospered and spread out from there to other parts of the world.

The Mount of Olives is where Allaah SWT informed 'Eesa PBUH that He will be raised and the Israelites will be cursed and punished.

At Mount Sinai, Allaah SWT took a covenant from the Israelites under very terrifying circumstances in which it appeared that the mountain was about to fall over them, This was done in order to symbolize that the covenant they are entering into was not a trivial matter but very serious, and to emphasize that a violation of the covenant would have dire consequences.

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How can anyone harbour the ideas that the Creator Who has given people the potential to be good and bad will not judge them? How can they assume that He bestowed them with all those human faculties which distinguish them from animals, without any purpose? Does He, with Eternal Wisdom and Absolute Knowledge, do meaningless things? He endowed you your own conscience and your feelings of right and wrong so that you are warned internally before you commit a wrong and so that you can judge yourselves before you are judged! How can He, Who has taken so many measures to guide you towards realizing your best potential, let you off scot-free without holding you accountable if you have done so or not?

So after all this rational evidence, what is your reason to deny or doubt the resurrection, judgment, justice, rewards and punishment?

If the administrators and rulers of this world try to maintain law and order and deliver justice in their territory, why will Allaah, the Sovereign of the whole universe, not deliver the perfect justice? Is He not the Most Just of all the rulers?

Indeed, He is!