

Al-Baqarah

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Introduction

As described in the introduction of the *Qur'an* the surahs are divided into two categories *Makkan* and *Madinan*. These are further sub-divided into groups of surahs forming pairs. We have already read surah *Al-Fatihah* which was revealed in *Makkah*. The first *Madinan* part starting from this surah consists of four surahs in two sub-divided groups. The first group consists of surah *Al-Baqarah* and surah *Al-Imran*, with surah *An-Nisa* and surah *Al-Maida* forming a pair in the second group.

The first surah of the *Madinan* group *Al-Baqarah* is the largest surah and it comprises nearly two and a half *ajza* of the *Qur'an*. It has 286 *ayat* divided into forty *ruku*'s and is the most important surah of the *Qur'an* as Prophet Mohammad(Peace be upon him) said in a *hadith*,

“Everything has a high peak, and Al-Baqarah is the high peak of the *Qur'an*..” [1]

And we can say that every phenomenon has a climax and the climax of *Qur'an* is surah *Al-Baqarah*. This surah can also be called ‘*Surah-tul-Ummatain*’, the surah of two Ummahs, because it discusses the present Muslim ummah as well as the former Muslim Ummah of *Children of Israel*.

The *Madinan* phase started with the *Hijrah*, and this surah was the first to be revealed in this phase with almost two third of the *Qur'an* already revealed in *Makkah*. This surah was revealed gradually step-by-step in a seventeen month time period between the start of *Hijrah* and the battle of *Badr*.

This surah can be divided into nearly two equal parts according to its subjects. The first part consists of 152 *ayat* divided into eighteen *ruku*'s, and the second part of 134 *ayat* is divided into twenty two *ruku*'s.

The first part addresses the former Muslim Ummah, *Bani Israel*(*Children of Israel*) who like Muslims were also acquainted with the Unity of Allah, Prophethood, Revelation, the Hereafter and the angels. Nearly ten ruku's out of eighteen in this part address *Bani Israel* starting from the 5th ruku and then again in the 15th ruku of this surah.

With two third *Qur'an* already revealed, the first four ruku's of this surah naturally discuss the basic theme of the *Makkan* phase. The first two of these describe the philosophy of the *Qur'an*. In the third ruku Allah has described the position of a man in this universe i.e. On what basis was he raised to the position of *Vicegerency*. It also discusses the struggle between the forces of good and forces of evil, struggle of a man with his ownself and the forces of *Satan*. The remaining four ruku's of this part discuss the changing of the *Qiblah* from *Jerusalem* to *Makkah*.

Jerusalem was the center of *Jewish* attention, the former Muslim Ummah for nearly two thousand years and it was of great significance to them but the substitution of *Jerusalem* with *Ka'bah* [2] led to the removal of *Bani Isreal* from their position as a Muslim Ummah and were replaced by the Ummah of Prophet Muhammad(*Peace be upon him*).

The second part addresses the present Muslim Ummah. At *Makkah* Islam was mainly concerned with the propagation of its fundamental principles and the moral training and had nothing to do with the obligations or prohibitions except *Salah*. But here in *Madinah* starting from the *Hijrah*, the *Sharia'h* (The code of law derived from the *Qur'an* and from the teachings and example of Mohammad (*Peace be upon him*)) of Islam was revealed. Allah issued directives on social, cultural, economic, political and legal matters. Firstly these directives included the obligations like *Zakah*, and *Siyam* and prohibitions on drinking alcohol and consuming *Riba*, which continue in surah *An-Nisa* and surah *Al-Maida*, and secondly they also discuss *Jihad*, *Infdaq* (spending in the way of Allah) and *Qitaal* in the cause of Allah respectively.

The knowledge about *Tafsir* (Commentary on the Qur'an), of an *ayah* is not possible without occupying oneself with their contextual background and explanation of the reasons for their revelation because various *ayat* were revealed at a particular time in history and in certain circumstances. So in order to know whether the revelation has a specific implication for the particular occasion it was connected with, or whether it is of a general nature and needs to be applied by all Muslims at all times; some special knowledge of the circumstances that surround the message is also necessary for fuller understanding of its meaning and interpretation.

“*Alif Lam Mim*” These letters in Arabic are known as *huruf al-muqatta’at*. They are fourteen in number and appear in the beginning of twenty nine surahs of the Qur'an. Although much has been said about these letters but the general consensus is that these are among those things whose knowledge Allah has kept only for Himself. Some of these surahs begin with a single letter like *Qaaf*, others with two, three or four letters with surah Maryam starting with five letters, viz. ‘*Kaf-Ha-Ya-Ain-Suad*’.

This is the Book; in it is guidance sure without doubt to those who fear Allah

This is the Book of Allah - ‘Al-Kitab’, in which there is no doubt. This Book is based wholly on truth and there is no doubt that it is a revelation from Allah and nothing contained in it can be subject to doubt. Further Allah says; *it is guidance for those who have Taqwa – fear of Allah.*

The root meaning of *Taqwa* is piety and righteousness, but here this meaning does not adequately render the positive content of this expression, rather it refers to those people who guard themselves against evil, fear Allah’s punishment, and abandon those things which can earn Allah’s displeasure.

This Book is the guidance for those *Muttaqun* who are always in search of the truth; these are the people who pray to Allah, ‘*O Allah! Guide us to*

The Right Way'. Their sole desire is to be guided towards the way of success. This is the relation between surah *Al-Fatihah* and this surah. Surah *Al-Fatihah* ended with the prayer: "Allah guide us to *The Right Way*" and this surah begins with the answer to that prayer, '*This is the Book; in it is guidance sure without doubt to those who fear Allah*', meaning the guidance they were asking for is this Book.

Although this Qur'an is guidance for all humanity but only those people who possess certain qualities can benefit from its guidance. The first of these qualities is the urge to search for truth, and then they should be able to distinguish between good and evil, should be careful to fulfill their duty to Allah and guard themselves against evil. On the other hand a person, who does not have the urge to save himself from evil and the *Day of Judgment*, is incapable of deriving any benefit from the guidance of the Qur'an.

Who believe in the Unseen are steadfast in prayer and spend out of what we have provided for them. One more quality of the *Muttaqun* (righteous people) is that they believe in the unseen i.e. they believe in the existence of that which is beyond the reach of human perception and who knows that ultimate reality lies beyond the realm of our senses. One of the most famous sages in ancient China was a wise philosopher named Confucius [2] who said,

'There is nothing more real, than what cannot be seen and there is nothing more certain than what cannot be heard'.

Al-Ghayb (The Unseen) denotes all those phases in the reality which are hidden from man's senses and which are beyond the scope of human observation and thinking. According to Qur'an, those people who believe in this Unseen reality are the ones who can really benefit from its guidance, but this will remain a closed Book for all those whose minds cannot accept this fundamental premise.

Another trait of *Muttaqun* is that they establish *Salah* because they don't only proclaim their faith verbally but also prove it by practical obedience to Allah, and they spend out of the bounties Allah has given them. This includes all types of obligatory charity and supererogatory spending to earn the pleasure of Allah.

Then Allah says; *Who believe in this Revelation which is sent to you (O Muhammad) and the Revelations which were sent before you*. It is not possible that one who believes in *Al-Ghayb*, establishes *Salah*, gives charity without believing in what the Messenger of Allah (*peace be upon him*) and the previous Messengers were sent with. They believe in what has been revealed to Mohammad (*peace be upon him*) and also all the Scriptures(*Torah, Injeel and Zabur*)^[3] and Prophets before him. And about the *Hereafter* they have unflinching certitude. The word used here is *يُوقِنُونَ* (*Yuqinun*) meaning they not only believe in the Hereafter but are deeply convinced that this is not their only existence, rather they are going to be raised up, and that an end to this earthly life will just be a beginning for an eternal life.

They are on guidance from their Lord and it is these who will prosper.
i.e. Those people who believe in *Al-Ghayb*, establish *Salah*, give *Zakah* , believe in Prophet Muhammad(*peace be upon him*) and all the books and Messengers before him, and are convinced about the Hereafter are the ones who are on true guidance and will be successful.

As described in the introduction, the *Tafsir* of an ayah depends upon the reasons and circumstances of its revelation, whether it is revealed for a specific purpose, contain a general meaning or both. Here we see that this *ayah* specifically describes the characters and beliefs of the Companions(*May Allah have mercy on them*) of the Prophet(*peace be upon him*) who were trained and taught by Muhammad(*Peace be upon him*) the

greatest teacher in all Mankind, like Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali (*May Allah be pleased with them all*). This is the group of people who have really benefited from the guidance of *Qur'an*, and these are the ones whose attributes and qualities are given here. And if you take this ayah generally then it means that any person who believes in *Al-Ghayb*, establishes *Salah*, gives *Zakah*, believes in Prophet Muhammad(*peace be upon him*) and all the scriptures and Messengers before him, and is convinced about the *Hereafter*, is the one who will attain the true guidance of the *Qur'an*. One should possess all the qualities discussed here as prerequisites to tread on the path towards the understanding of the *Qur'an*.

Three types of people have been described in first two *ruku's*. Firstly those who are on true guidance from their Sustainer, Secondly those who have denied the truth and in the end Allah mentions the hypocrites. We have already discussed the traits of the believers, here in the following *ayat* the behavior of a disbeliever is given.

As to those who reject faith it is the same to them whether thou warn them or do not warn them; they are not going to believe. This *ayat* talks about those people who have denied the truth, who do not believe in the *Unseen* or in the *Hereafter*, for them it is the same whether thou warn them or do not warn them, they are not going to believe.

This *ayat* was revealed specifically for those *Kuffar* in *Makkah* who were the first ones to be called towards the message of Allah. Otherwise if we take this *ayat* in a general sense, it will mean that all those who did not enter Islam at the time this *ayat* was revealed will never ever believe in this *Qur'an*, but it was for those people who kept on rejecting the truth for twelve years of preaching of Prophet(*Peace be upon him*) at *Makkah*. They knew it was the truth but they did not want to accept it because of sheer arrogance and hatred they had for Prophet Muhammad(*Peace be*

upon him). For such disbelievers Allah says; O' Muhammad(*Peace be upon him*) it is alike for them whether you warn them or not they are not going to believe.

Allah has sealed their hearts and their hearing, their eyes are covered, and there is a grievous punishment for them. Because of their arrogance and constant denial of the truth Allah has put a seal on their hearts, hearing and sight, and they could neither see the guidance nor hear, comprehend or understand. Allah has placed a covering on their sight, meaning eyes, and so they do not see. The Prophet(*Peace be upon him*) preached to these people for more than twelve years, they were so close to guidance but still very far. These people even included Prophet's(*Peace be upon him*) uncles, Abu Lahab and Abu Talib. They knew what Muhammad(*Peace be upon him*) is teaching is the truth but not only denied it but barred others from the path of Allah. For such people Allah says; He has put a seal on their hearts as a punishment of their disbelief. But this does not mean that their disbelief is a consequence of Allah, sealing their hearts. Instead Allah seals and closes their hearts and ears as a consequence of their denying the truth, and a grievous punishment and suffering awaits them.

We already mentioned that the first four *ayat* describe the *Muttaqun*, the next two *ayat* describe the disbelievers. Afterwards, Allah describes the hypocrites who show their belief and hide their disbelief. Allah says; *There are some people who say: "We believe in Allah and the Last Day" yet they are not true believers.* And they say what their hearts do not profess. This *ayat* specifically describes two types of people, the hypocrites and the *Jews of Madinah*. Soon after the Battle of *Badr* occurred and Allah gave victory to Islam and its people, an Islamic state started to emerge

and when the message of Islam reached the hearts of the people of *Madinah*, most of the *Jews* and others from the people of the Book pretended to be Muslims and follow Islam but infact they were liars who had hatred for Islam and Prophet Muhammad(*Peace be upon him*). These Jews used to say that we believe in Allah and the *Hereafter* just like Muslims, but they had hatred for Prophet Muhammad(*Peace be upon him*), so Allah says that these hypocrites utter false statements from their tongues but in reality they are not believers. Allah revealed surah *Munafiqun* and surah *Taubah* on hypocrites of *Madinah*. He also mentioned them in surah *Qitaal* when the hypocrites who had enmity in their hearts demanded a surah to be revealed for *Qitaal*[4] and did not want to obey the Messenger of Allah(*Peace be upon him*). These hypocrites emphasized their belief in Allah and the Hereafter when it was not the case. We mentioned the specific implication of this ayat but generally this ayat refers to all those who have traits like those of the hypocrites.

Whenever there is a revolutionary movement three types of people always emerge, People who will accept that ideology , then those who will reject it, and a third group who will neither show acceptance nor rejection, and will wait and see which direction the wind blows. These are the hypocrites, whose deeds are different from what they show and what they utter is different from what they have in their hearts.

They try to deceive Allah and the believers. However, they deceive none except themselves yet they do not realize it. These hypocrites try to deceive Allah and the believers. They think that their outward belief will help them with Allah and that they will save themselves and mislead Allah and the believers by what they utter but infact they deceive themselves and they perceive it not.

In their hearts is a disease; and Allah has increased their disease and they shall have painful punishment for the lies they have told. Allah says, that in the hearts of these hypocrites there is a disease i.e. a disease of deception and doubt which goes on to develop into *Nifaq* (Hypocrisy), which is one of the major sins and takes a person to reside in the Hellfire forever, and Allah increases their disease i.e. their deception and their shameful behavior. This has always been the *sunnah* of Allah, if a person is a believer and he follows the right path then Allah makes his way easy for him, but if he is a hypocrite or a disbeliever and follows the footsteps of the *Devil*, then Allah makes his wrong deeds seem good to him and lets him grope blindly in the darkness. These are the people for whom there will be painful punishment because of the lies they have been uttering.

We have already mentioned that three types of people emerge whenever there is a call to a revolutionary movement. The third type of people are those who neither accept the call nor reject it; rather they try to make peace between believers and the disbelievers, between good and evil. They want to make peace not for the sake of the truth but only to save their own skins, because Allah has commanded to fight against the *kuffar* until the *Batil* is distinguished from the *Haqq* and they know that if they have to fight against the disbelievers then they will have to spend from their wealth and even lay down their lives in the cause of Allah. They don't want to follow the Commandments of Allah and want to make friends with both the believers and with Allah's enemies and that is an act of mischief because they deceive the believers in believing what they don't believe. Allah says; *When it is said to them: "Make not mischief on the earth" they say: "Why we only want to make peace!"*. And they believe, the Muslims and Prophet Muhammad(*Peace be upon him*) are the ones who create mischief. Infact they are the ones who create mischief on earth, although in their ignorance, they do not see it to be mischief.

Be aware! They are the ones who make mischief but they do not realize it. This is the decree of Allah for such hypocrites that they are themselves mischief mongers and spreading corruption but they don't realize it. They are such because they don't want to follow the *Deen* of Allah, they don't want to fashion their lives on earth according to the commandments of Allah and this in itself is mischief, because it is a rebellion against Allah The Master of the universe, and whosoever disobeys Allah or commands that Allah be disobeyed, he has committed mischief on earth. But the hypocrites because of their ignorance don't realize it to be a mischief.

When it is said to them: "Believe as the others believe" i.e. Believe just as the believers like Abu Bakr, Umar, Ibn Muadh, and Sad Ibn Muadh (May Allah be please with them all) have believed. They say: "Shall we believe as the fools believe?" (May Allah curse the hypocrites). Meaning, the Companions(*May Allah be pleased with them*) of the Prophet(*Peace be upon him*). They think that these people who have believed in Islam and are thereby risking their lives and have exposed themselves to all kinds of risks and tribulations are merely fools. These believers who had to leave their homes leaving their families behind or were expelled from *Makkah*, who suffered persecution for Allah's sake and fought and were killed, these in the sight of the hypocrites were the fools and fanatics. Allah says; *Be aware! They themselves are the fools, if only they could understand.* Allah has affirmed that these hypocrites are the ones who are fools but they do not know because they are unaware of their degree of deviation and ignorance.

When they meet the believers they say: "We are believers" i.e. They pretend to be their friends. But when they are alone with their Shayatin,

they say: "We are really with you, we were only mocking the believers".

The meaning of *Shaytan* in Arabic means rebellious, the one who is despaired from the mercy of Allah. In this *ayat* the word *Shaytan* is used for the chiefs of the *Jews* of *Madinah*. These hypocrites were very close to the *Jews* of *Madinah*, and whenever they were with them they said we are with you, we only ridicule people and deceive them i.e. the believers.

Allah answers the hypocrites; *Allah will throw back their mockery on them i.e.* it is not they who mock at the believers but Allah mocks at them, meaning Allah will punish them similar to the act of evil they have committed. Further Allah says; *He leaves them increasing in their deviation to wander blindly.* This is the *Sunnah* of Allah, He gives them respite and lets them increase in their arrogance and deviation if they do not want to follow the right path.

These are the people who have purchased error and falsehood in exchange for guidance. They were given guidance when Allah revealed *Qur'an* but they went further in their misguidance and abandoned guidance. They believed and then disbelieved and preferred deviation to guidance of the *Qur'an*. But Allah says; *their bargain is of no use to them nor were they rightly guided,* because of their *Nifaq*. [5]

; when it illuminated all around him Allah took away the light
(their eyesight) and left them in utter darkness: they could see nothing.

Allah has given two similes in the following few *ayat*. There are two scholarly opinions regarding these similes. One opinion is that the both of these similes discuss the third category of the people meaning the *Munafiqun*. The other opinion is that the first simile given in this ayah gives an example of the *Kuffar*, and the second simile(2:19) is regarding the *Munafiqun*. We have already discussed how Allah describes the *Kuffar* (2:6, 7) who have gone so far in their arrogance and evil that Allah

has sealed their hearts and their eyesight. For those disbelievers Allah says; *their example is that of a man who kindled a fire, when it lighted all around him Allah took away their light and left them in utter darkness so they could not see.*

This is a situation which was commonly experienced by the Arab travelers in the desert. They used to travel at night because of the high temperatures during the day and if they became lost in the desert, they used to kindle a fire to find their way, but if suddenly they lose their eyesight, they will again find themselves left in the darkness.

The fire which lights and illuminates the surroundings is infact the *Hidayah* given to the Prophet Muhammad(*Peace be upon him*), but these disbelievers out of their jealousy do not want to accept the guidance, so Allah took away their eyesight and left them in darkness of *Jahiliyyah*(Ignorance).

They are deaf, dumb and blind, and they will never return, O' Muhammad(Peace be upon him) to the right path because Allah has taken away their sights, but it is not the eyes which have grown blind, infact it is their hearts which are blind.

Or another example is that of a dark storm-cloud in the sky charged with thunder and lightning. They press their fingers into their ears at the sound of each stunning thunderclap for fear of death: Allah is encircling the unbelievers from all sides.

Allah gives another parable for the hypocrites, an example of a rainstorm in the sky, that brings darkness, thunder and lightning. They put their fingers in their ears, to keep out the stunning thunderclap for fear of death, and they think that its sound will take away their hearing. But know that Allah has already encircled the disbelievers from all sides i.e. they cannot hide from the punishment of Allah. The rainstorm here refers to the Qur'an which was revealed as a blessing to the world, and the thunder

and lightning that the rainstorm brings, refers to the trials and tribulations that a revolutionary movement confronts.

The lightening almost snatches away their sights and whenever they see some light, they start going in that direction but when it is dark, they stand still. Meaning the hypocrites, that whenever they see Muslims and Islam being victorious they come to acquire the share but as soon as Muslims suffer a calamity they disassociate themselves from the believers. *And if Allah willed he could taken away from them, their hearing and their sight. Verily Allah is All Powerful.*

Whenever a revolution takes place, it has to face a lot of trials, tribulations and difficulties, and the people involved in that struggle may have to risk their lives, give up their wealth, sacrifice their careers and businesses, in order to succeed in their struggle. But within these people there are those who want to be a part of that struggle but they don't want to risk their lives or their properties like the hypocrites of *Madinah*. Whenever Muslims faced a calamity or were called upon to wage war against the disbelievers, they would make excuses in order to save themselves from all the trouble. But when Islam and its people became victorious, they started to follow them and make tall claims about their sincerity.

We have already discussed what Allah has revealed for these hypocrites (2: 8, 9, 10). They claim that they believe in Allah and the Hereafter but the truth is that they are liars. And they make friends with the leaders and the elite among Jews, hypocrites and the idolaters who are opposed to Islam and its followers.

Allah described the hypocrites in surah Hajj in these words,

"There are some people who worship Allah standing on the verge of faith (half faith and half disbelief). When such a person is blessed with good fortune he is content; but if he encounters a trial he turns back headlong; thus losing both this world and the Hereafter, which is a clear-cut loss."^[7]

There are some people who worship Allah, keeping themselves on the borderline of faith. if there is good fortune they are satisfied with Him, and follow the believers but whenever they face difficulties, are called upon to spend from their wealth, fight in the cause of Allah, they turn their backs losing this world and the Hereafter, and that is surely a great loss.

Foot Notes

[1] The Hadith was collected by At Tabarani (6:163), Ibn Hibban (2:78) in his sahih and Ibn Marduwyah.

[2] *Ka'bah*, the central, cubic, stone structure, covered by a black cloth, within the Great Mosque(*Masjid ul Haraam*) in *Makkah*, Saudi Arabia. The sacred nature of the site predates Islam: The holy *Qur'an* says that the *Ka'bah* was built by Adam(*Peace be upon him*) and rebuilt by Abraham(*Peace be upon him*) and the descendants of Noah(*Peace be upon him*). Also known as the *House of God*, it is the center of the circumambulations performed during the *Hajj*, the Pilgrimage, and it is toward the *Ka'bah* that Muslims face in their prayers. Around the *Ka'bah* is a restricted area, *haram*, extending in some directions as far as 12 mi, into which only Muslims may enter.

[3] Confucius (circa 551-479 BC). He sometimes went by the names Kong Zi though he was born - Kong Qiu - styled Zhong Ni. He was born in the village of Zou in the country of Lu. This chinese man was a well-known leader in philosophy and he also made many wise phrases and theories about the law, life, and the government. [Encyclopedia Britannica]

[4] The scriptures that Allah mentions in the Qur'ân are as follows:

1. The Scrolls that were revealed to Abraham (peace be upon him)
2. The Torah that was revealed to Moses (peace be upon him)
3. The Psalms that were revealed to David (peace be upon him)
4. The Gospel that was revealed to Jesus (peace be upon him)
5. The *Qur'ân* that was revealed to Muhammad (peace be upon him) and which has been preserved to this day in its original form.

[5] The believers were asking: "Why is not a Surah revealed allowing us to fight?" But when a decisive Surah carrying the order of allowing them to fight is revealed, you saw those in whose hearts was a disease looking at you like the one under the shadow of death. Woe to them! , (Surah Muhammad, ayah 20).

[6] *Nifaq* means to show belief and conceal evil. Ibn Jurayj said of the hypocrite that, "His actual deeds are different from what he publicizes, what he conceals is different from what he utters, his entrance and presence are not the same as his exit and absence. "

(Tafsir Ibn Kathir , (Al-Baqarah) : 8)

[7] Surah Hajj, 22 : 11.