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“That Which Is Coming”:  
An Examination of *Sura 56*

سورة الواقعة

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

إِذَا وَقَعَتِ الْوَاقِعَةُ ① لَيْسَ لَوْعَتِهَا كَاذِبَةٌ ② خَافِضَةٌ رَافِعَةٌ ③  
 إِذَا رُجَّتِ الْأَرْضُ رَجًا ④ وَبُسَّتِ الْجِبَالُ بَسًا ⑤ فَكَانَتْ هَبَاءً  
 مُبْتَثًّا ⑥ وَكُنُفٌ أُرْوَمًا ⑦ نَلْنَمَهُ ⑧ فَأَصْحَابُ الْمَيْمَنَةِ مَا أَصْحَابُ  
 الْمَيْمَنَةِ ⑨ وَأَصْحَابُ الْمَشْأَمِ مَا أَصْحَابُ الْمَشْأَمِ ⑩ وَالسَّيْفُورُ  
 السَّيْفُورُ ⑪ أُولَئِكَ الْمُقَرَّبُونَ ⑫ فِي جَنَّاتِ النَّعِيمِ ⑬ ثَلَاثَةٌ مِنْ  
 الْأُولَى ⑭ وَقِيلَ لِلَّذِينَ الْآخِرِينَ ⑮ عَلَى سُورٍ مَوْضُوعَةٍ ⑯ مُتَكَبِّرِينَ  
 عَلَيْهِمْ مُتَعَلِّبِينَ ⑰ يَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ وِلْدَانٌ مُخَلَّدُونَ ⑱ بِأَكْوَابٍ  
 وَأَبَارِقٍ وَكَأْسٍ مِنْ مَعِينٍ ⑲ لَا يُصَدَّعُونَ عَنْهَا وَلَا يُزْفَرُونَ ⑳ وَفِيهَا  
 مِمَّا يَشْتَبُونَ ㉑ وَكَلِمٍ طَوِيرٍ مِمَّا يَشْتَبُونَ ㉒ وَحُورٍ عِينٍ ㉓  
 كَأَمْثَلِ الثُّلُومِ الَّتِيِّ ㉔ جَزَاءً لِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ㉕ لَا يَسْمَعُونَ فِيهَا  
 لَغْوًا وَلَا تَأْتِيهَا ㉖ إِلَّا فِيكَا سَلَا سَلَا ㉗ وَأَصْحَابُ الْيَمِينِ مَا أَصْحَابُ  
 الْيَمِينِ ㉘ فِي سِدْرٍ مَشْشُورٍ ㉙ وَطَلْحٍ مَبْشُورٍ ㉚ وَظِلِّ مُدْمَدِيرٍ ㉛  
 وَمَاءٍ مَسْكُوبٍ ㉜ وَفِيهَا كَثِيرٌ ㉝ لَا مَقْطُوعَةٍ وَلَا مَمْنُوعَةٍ ㉞  
 وَفِيهَا مَرْوَعَةٌ ㉟ إِنَّا أَنشَأْنَاهُنَّ إِنشَاءً ㊱ لِيَجْعَلْنَهُنَّ أَزْوَاجًا ㊲ مُرْتَبًا

In “That Which Is Coming” (Q 56:1-96), the cataclysmic events of Judgment Day drastically revolutionize human society through the creation of a new social class system organized on the basis of proximity to God. Although the Qur’an fails to explicitly state specific selection criteria for paradise and hell (apart from the presence or absence of faith), further examination of these contrasting eternal rewards, especially between elite and ordinary believers, can provide valuable insights into fundamental character disparities between their recipients that are meaningful to God.

As an American millennial woman, the analytical framework I employ in my commentary on this *sura* (chapter) of the Qur’an is often at variance with that of more conventional Muslim commentators, such as Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli, Sahl al-Tustari, and

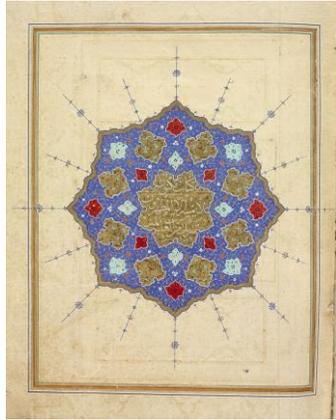
Sayyid Qutb. While the prevailing concerns of this commentary are more closely aligned to the typical Sufi preoccupation with individual spiritual cultivation, rather than the predominantly social orientations of both Sunni and Islamist commentators found here, our methodology and priorities still frequently differ. Although this diversity of interpretations may occasionally impede our mutual comprehension of the Qur'an, it valuably underscores the necessity to avoid over-generalization and take a more individualized approach to understanding Muslims. In the broader context of religion, this study seeks to emphasize the kaleidoscopic array of perspectives that compose individual faiths. Although different spiritual traditions often seem like homogenous entities in inexorable conflict, upon further scrutiny, superficially cohesive theologies like Islam often are akin to contentious, pointillist artwork themselves.

The contents of *sura* 56 can be neatly divided into two sections. Verses 1-56 describe in detail the material circumstances assigned to the different spiritual classes established on Judgment Day, while the second portion of the scripture (Q 56:57-96) reiterates the omnipotence of God, as proof of his capability to implement this radically new vision for society. The majority of apocalyptic *suras* emphasize previous cases of divine retribution—such as that against the citizens of Thamud, Ad, and Egypt,<sup>1</sup> or the magnitude of creation to substantiate the credibility of such fantastic future events. However, this *sura* provides an exceptional presentation of heaven and hell, by imposing stratification upon the former. Although a general consensus exists for what constitutes pain, the definition of pleasure entails greater subjectivity. The hierarchy of believers and their respective rewards is indicative of a greater possession of certain moral attributes along an ascending trajectory toward God. Just as illiteracy can prevent one from

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<sup>1</sup> Qur'an 69:4-12.

savoring the work of Proust, spiritual immaturity can impede the enjoyment of divine splendor. On the basis of the ultimate rewards granted by God, readers can subtly detect what values take precedence.



As a Sufi mystic, it is unsurprising that Sahl al-Tustari was more preoccupied with the moral composition of those depicted in *sura* 56, instead of physical descriptions of an immanent Resurrection Day or miraculous natural phenomena utilized by the Qur'an to make future apocalyptic claims seem less fantastic. However, by claiming that the foremost of believers “are those for whom God’s election and special friendship preceded them before they were even brought into existence,”<sup>2</sup> Tustari adheres to a doctrine of predestination that limits the usefulness of this scripture for Muslims seeking guidelines for spiritual progress. Likewise, by placing equal emphasis in their commentaries on the reclassification of humanity during Judgment and irrefutable evidence that such a seemingly preposterous event can occur, both Mahalli and Qutb conform to a more conventional interpretation of the *sura* as further reiteration of prophetic truth, instead of an informative illustration of moral evolution.

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<sup>2</sup> Ali and Annabel Keeler. *Tafsir al-Tustari: Great Commentaries on the Holy Qur'an*. (Fons Vitae: Louisville, 2011). [www.altafsir.com/Books?Tustari.pdf](http://www.altafsir.com/Books?Tustari.pdf). 218.

The combination of a meticulous description of the world to come and an assertion of divine authority over nature within this *sura* underscores the fact that it was intended to address both believers and nonbelievers. Not only does the imminent prospect of dwelling “amid scorching wind and scalding water in the shadow of black smoke”<sup>3</sup> promote a sense of urgency for conversion within Muhammad’s audience, but the text directly confronts skeptics with the rhetorical question of “How can you scorn this statement?”<sup>4</sup> after swearing to the divine origins of the Qur’an in verses 75-80. Nonetheless, by noting distinctions between the rewards later allocated to believers, this passage is clearly preaching to the converted as well. Although the text omits any direct behavioral injunctions, by tracing the contents of these divergent outcomes, one can assume various character traits.

Tustari’s fixation on a socially stratified community of believers, where “their stations in nearness [to God] are according to the degree of proximity of their hearts to the gnosis of God,”<sup>5</sup> alters the text to address merely a portion of the converted seeking mystical transcendence. Conversely, both traditional Sunni and modern Islamist exegeses seem to view this passage as a frightful, awe-inspiring conversion tool instead. Although Mahalli’s approach to the eternal rewards of paradise is often tautological, he urgently attempts to convert skeptics to Islam by further clarifying scriptures pertinent to them. For instance, in verse 87, Mahalli painstakingly stresses that if heathens could deny resurrection, then they should be capable of repudiating death as well.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Qutb explicitly states that the main purpose of Al-Waqi’ah is to portray the events of

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<sup>3</sup> Qur’an 56:42-43.

<sup>4</sup> Qur’an 56:81.

<sup>5</sup> Keeler, *Tafsir al-Tustari*, 219.

<sup>6</sup> Feras Hamsa. *Tafsir al-Jalalayn: Great Commentaries on the Holy Qur’an*. (Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought: Amman, 2008). 531.

Resurrection Day and “specifically refute[s] the argument of those who doubt it, denying the Qur’an and associating partners with God.”<sup>7</sup> Whereas I saw *sura* 56 as a universal message, Muslim commentators across the spectrum obviously envisioned a more select audience that corresponded with their own conceptions.

According to this Meccan *sura* there will be three new classes of people established on the Day of Judgment: those on the Left (the damned), those on the Right (the saved), and those in front, “who will be the ones brought nearest to God.”<sup>8</sup> This spatial configuration is very revealing. Through recollection of the crucial supplication within the Fatiha for guidance “to the straight path: the path of those You have blessed, those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray,”<sup>9</sup> we can deduce that Right and Left represent the binaries of good and evil. This dichotomy precipitates a decision to either submit to the religious moral code or deviate from it. To designate the third category as anterior does not make the blasphemous claim of surpassing God in any manner, but rather serves as an indication that these believers conformed to the divine will on their own volition, without coercion. Rather than merely adhere to strictures, this class exceeded expectations by aligning their characters with God, instead of just submitting to His will.

Tustari seems to confirm my assumption that the foremost “are in stations of proximity [to God] and [enjoy] the ease of intimacy,” by making a marked distinction between those who have directly unified themselves with the will of God and others who must still rely upon the guidance of spiritual intermediaries. Although he does not dwell

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<sup>7</sup> Sayyid Qutb. *In the Shade of the Qur’an: Volume 16*. (The University of Bradford Islamic Society, 2014). 305.

<sup>8</sup> Qur’an 56:11.

<sup>9</sup> Qur’an 1:6-7.

on the symbolic significance of one's directional position to God as I have, he still concludes that the elite of verse 13 is composed of "the people of gnosis [from the past]" and that ordinary believers are those who merely "believed in Muhammad and in all the messengers and books."<sup>10</sup> In contrast, Mahalli claims that the foremost of believers are prophets; his reading of verses 13-14, which rhetorically differentiates communities of old from those of Muhammad, suggests that the elite of heaven will be primarily composed of prominent People of the Book that preceded Islam. Although Qutb later acknowledges this interpretation, he clearly favors the views of Islamic pundits like Ibn Kathir, who consider both former and later generations of believers to be followers of the Prophet Muhammad. Whereas Tustari and I are more concerned with the idea of increasing degrees of spiritual communion with God, commentators like Mahalli and Qutb seem to ascribe paramount importance to establishing the practice of monotheism or more specifically, Islam.

"When the earth is shaken violently and the mountains are ground to powder and turn to scattered dust"<sup>11</sup> humanity will be reorganized into these three classes. These catastrophic events can be interpreted as being metaphorically representative of the eventual violent upheaval of the foundations of society and subsequent reduction of the high and mighty to inconsequentiality. This is explicitly guaranteed by the undeniable process of "bringing low and raising high"<sup>12</sup> that will occur "when that which is coming arrives,"<sup>13</sup> which applies not only to natural phenomenon, but to human souls as well. Thus, Judgment Day will initiate a complete reversal in the status quo. Therefore,

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<sup>10</sup> Keeler, *Tafsir al-Tustari*, 218.

<sup>11</sup> Qur'an 56:4-6.

<sup>12</sup> Qur'an 56:3.

<sup>13</sup> Qur'an 56:1.

although this *sura* neglects to clearly enunciate the past conduct which merited these different fates, one can deduce that their previous circumstances were entirely opposite of the new conditions imposed upon these parties.

In accordance with his inward perspective, Tustari omits description of the cataclysmic events of Judgment Day altogether. For verse 3, he merely asserts that “*some* people will be brought low by their false claims and *some* people will be raised high by their realities.”<sup>14</sup> Whereas I assumed that the imminent “bringing low and raising high,” underscored by massive physical destruction, would entail a universal status reversal for humanity, Tustari is much more conservative in his estimation of later class mobility, by basing future spiritual stature only upon one’s knowledge of God, instead of former wealth and social position. While Mahalli seems to interpret these natural disasters literally through merely restating them without qualification, Qutb views them as more of a rhetorical device or “...merely an introduction to results that are so frightful that no words can adequately describe them.”<sup>15</sup> Despite our mutual allegorical interpretations of these earthly upheavals, his ultimate conclusion that “standards and values will be set straight in God’s scale, after they have been out of balance in this world”<sup>16</sup> is more closely aligned to that of Tustari. Whereas their commentaries hint at the potential of both hierarchies—human and divine—occasionally corresponding prior to Judgment, my premise of a complete revolution does not permit that possibility. Therefore, they cannot extract moral implications from the text in the same manner I have.

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<sup>14</sup> Keeler, *Tafsir al-Tustari*, 218. Italics mine.

<sup>15</sup> Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur’an*, 318.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 318.

The lifestyle assigned to those on the Left “who have gone astray and denied the truth,”<sup>17</sup> which consists of eating “from the bitter tree of Zaqqum ...and drink[ing] scalding water, lapping it like thirsty camels,”<sup>18</sup> leaves much to be desired. If belief were the sole criterion for salvation from this horrific fate, then distinctions would not be made between believers in paradise. However, it can be surmised from the aforementioned sea change of status, that such current suffering and deprivation are due to previous guilt of decadence and oppression. The former assumption is confirmed by the text, which explicitly states, “Before, they overindulged in luxury.”<sup>19</sup> How they further “persisted in great sin”<sup>20</sup> remains more ambiguous. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume that if immoderation were the sole culprit of their condemnation to hell, then a spartan environment alone would be sufficient punishment. The fact that the minimal resources at their disposal now inflict so much agony suggests that they formerly sought and maintained their relative advantage at the painful expense of others, whether through aggressive cheating or neglect of the poor.

In his more exclusive address to Sufi aspirants, Tustari must have considered the plight of eternal damnation irrelevant and therefore neglected to grant any consideration to those on the Left. Fortunately, both Mahalli and Qutb are very informative in this regard. For a contemporary Western observer, the accusation that the damned formerly “persisted in great sin”<sup>21</sup> is extremely vague; under the assumption that Resurrection Day will install a new social order that is diametrically opposed to the status quo, I surmised the character of these sins on the basis of their punishments. However, Sunni and Islamist

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<sup>17</sup> Qur’an 56:51.

<sup>18</sup> Qur’an 56:52-55.

<sup>19</sup> Qur’an 56:45.

<sup>20</sup> Qur’an 56:46.

<sup>21</sup> Qur’an 56:46.

commentators here are unanimous in their identification of these past transgressions. Mahalli's translation of the Qur'an actually states "the great sin" (rather than the great volume or severity of sin generally indicated), which he subsequently claims to be "idolatry."<sup>22</sup> Even Qutb interprets a more ambiguous persistence in "heinous sin" to be the association of partners with god and a personal breach of faith in the unity of god.<sup>23</sup> These similar interpretations appear to exalt faith before deeds, whereas mine tends to promote the latter through seeking valuable behavioral prescriptions embedded in the text.

The sumptuous accommodations awarded to believers after the Last Judgment give a slight intimation of previous experiences of deprivation. Through exploring minor discrepancies between the contrastive states of bliss enjoyed by elite and common believers, one can better apprehend their respective dispositions. For instance, environmental disparities between these two realms of paradise reveal the incongruent values of their different inhabitants. Those merely on the Right "will dwell amid thornless lote trees and clustered acacia with spreading shade."<sup>24</sup> This splendid natural setting initially seems superficially better than the lifestyles granted to their nominal superiors, who will "on couches of well-woven cloth...sit facing each other."<sup>25</sup> However, the comparative opulence of the former hints at spiritual immaturity. These materialistic preoccupations impede ordinary believers from approaching closer to God. In contrast, extraordinary believers are content to dispense with inconsequential

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<sup>22</sup> Hamza, *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, 529.

<sup>23</sup> Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 323.

<sup>24</sup> Qur'an 56:28-30.

<sup>25</sup> Qur'an 56:15-16.

externalities altogether and abide within a pristine state of divine communion in the company of similar individuals consumed by the same pursuit.



Tustari seems to concur with this view by eschewing further elucidation of the hereafter, except for his remarks on the absence of “idle or sinful talk”<sup>26</sup> eventually guaranteed to preminent believers. According to Tustari, the elite paradise “is in no way a scene of frivolity...it is a place which has been sanctified with [divine] lights for the holy...it is what has become manifest from them and upon them that makes them worthy.”<sup>27</sup> This implies that heaven for them is merely an enlightened state of being, as opposed to an idealized version of the known world. By contrast, although Mahalli fails to meaningfully distinguish between these different states of bliss, by merely adding superfluous details like “rods of gold and jewels”<sup>28</sup> that the couches of the elite will be woven onto, Qutb seems to acknowledge that the realities of paradise are beyond mortal grasp and that the Qur’an is merely enumerating the future luxuriousness of heaven in

<sup>26</sup> Qur’an 56:25.

<sup>27</sup> Keeler, *Tafsir al-Tustari*, 219.

<sup>28</sup> Hamza, *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, 527.

terms its audience can visualize.<sup>29</sup> While Qutb agrees that material benefits are of secondary importance for the foremost believers, by stating that “The Gardens of Bliss, with all that they contain, is nothing compared to that topmost favor of being nearest to God,”<sup>30</sup> our views diverge over the external fixations of lesser believers. In opposition to the deficient spiritual devotion my analysis claims, Qutb attributes their overwhelming focus on luxurious comforts to the previous privations they had to suffer as nomads.<sup>31</sup>

In sum, this dramatic account of the drastic reappraisal of humanity during Judgment Day sought not only to win converts, but to address the faithful as well. The creation of a hierarchy within the *umma* tacitly implies that faith alone is insufficient. Although the Qur’an largely omits any overt behavioral injunctions, one can surmise what constitutes proper conduct by observing the contents of post-apocalyptic identities. Based on the revolutionary status reversal imposed and what constitutes the highest pleasure within this new order, readers can determine not only the merits of certain behaviors, but also the divine value system itself. Although material abundance is not criminal, it is shown to detract from communion with God through a subtle promotion of asceticism.

While this conclusion mostly affirms the mystical ideology of Tustari, he was more preoccupied with the state of transcendence itself, rather than the specific means to attain it. Since the textual approaches of Mahalli and Qutb were more social in scope, they both viewed religious recruitment as the primary purpose of this scripture, not personal moral clarification. Based on the mutual assumption that disbelievers were the intended audience of this *sura*, their main judgment criterion was faith, whereas Tustari

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<sup>29</sup> Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur’an*, 320.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 320.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 322.

and I sought to clarify later distinctions between believers, by placing a greater emphasis on conduct. However, none of the Muslim commentators took the liberty of determining prior behavior on the basis of the rewards and punishments eventually granted. Tustari clearly distinguishes the two classes of believers according to his own Sufi framework, while the other pundits that prioritized conversion of disbelievers merely hint at these character distinctions between the faithful incidentally, if at all. The many idiosyncratic approaches to scriptures found just within these few commentaries demonstrates the astounding heterogeneity of the Islamic community. Indeed, one can only apprehend what individual Muslims or religious practitioners in general believe through their own testimonies.

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