

An Analysis of Two Qur'anic Terms

(1) وَأَنْجَيْنَا مُوسَى وَمَنْ مَعَهُ أَجْمَعِينَ {0} ثُمَّ أَغْرَقْنَا الْآخَرِينَ {0} إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ {0} وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ

And We saved Musa and those with him, all of them. Then We drowned the others. Most surely there is a sign in this, but most of them do not believe. And most surely your Lord is the Mighty, the Merciful. (al-Shu'ara', 26/65-68)

(2) كَذَّبَتْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ الْمُرْسَلِينَ

The people of Nuh rejected the messengers. (al-Shu'ara', 26/105)

فَأَنْجَيْنَاهُ وَمَنْ مَعَهُ فِي الْفُلِّ الْمَشْحُونِ {0} ثُمَّ أَغْرَقْنَا بَعْدُ الْبَاقِينَ {0} إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ {0} وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ

So We delivered him and those with him in the laden ark. Then We drowned the rest afterwards. Most surely there is a sign in this, but most of them do not believe. And most surely your Lord is the Mighty, the Merciful. (al-Shu'ara', 26/119-122)

(3) كَذَّبَتْ عَادُ الْمُرْسَلِينَ

Ad gave the lie to the messengers. (al-Shu'ara', 26/123)

فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَأَهْلَكْنَاهُمْ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ {0} وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ
الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ

So they gave him the lie, then We destroyed them. Most surely there is a sign in this, but most of them do not believe. And most surely your Lord is the Mighty, the Merciful. (al-Shu'ara', 26/139-140)

(4) كَذَّبَتْ ثَمُودُ الْمُرْسَلِينَ

Thamud gave the lie to the messengers. (al-Shu'ara', 26/141)

فَأَخَذَهُمُ الْعَذَابُ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ {0} وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ
الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ

So the punishment overtook them. Most surely there is a sign in this, but most of them do not believe. And most surely your Lord is the Mighty, the Merciful. (al-Shu'ara', 26/158-159)

(5) كَذَّبَتْ قَوْمُ لُوطٍ الْمُرْسَلِينَ

The people of Lut gave the lie to the messengers. (al-Shu'ara', 26/160)

وَأَمْطَرْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ مَطَرًا فَسَاءَ مَطَرُ الْمُنذَرِينَ {0} إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ
مُؤْمِنِينَ {0} وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ

And We rained down upon them a rain, and evil was the rain on those warned. Most surely there is a sign in this, but most of them do not believe. And most surely your Lord is the Mighty, the Merciful. (al-Shu'ara', 26/173-175)

(6) كَذَّبَ أَصْحَابُ الْأَيْكَةِ الْمُرْسَلِينَ

The dwellers of the thicket gave the lie to the messengers. (al-Shu'ara', 26/176)

فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَأَخَذَهُمْ عَذَابُ يَوْمِ الظُّلَّةِ إِنَّهُ كَانَ عَذَابَ يَوْمٍ عَظِيمٍ {0} إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً
وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ {0} وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ

But they called him a liar, so the punishment of the day of covering overtook them; surely it was the punishment of a grievous day. Most surely there is a sign in this, but most of them do not believe. And most surely your Lord is Mighty, the Merciful. (al-Shu'ara', 26/189–191)

The history of mankind and a thorough analysis of its development reveals a unique repository of information; realities are revealed through deep contemplation of these events – indeed, this is one of the soundest ways of discovering truths.

The Qur'an encourages man to discover these truths by studying the factors that led to the successes and failures, and the rise and fall of previous nations, and the fate of those who violated the truth. By deliberating over the laws and regular trends of history and studying accurate analyses of historical events, he can better interpret the various incidents and draw lessons and benefit from the events of the day.

The term, “’aziz” (mighty) is one of the most beautiful qualities of God that the Qur'an employs with great emphasis and frequency. This great attribute has nearly always been used in conjunction with the term, “’hakim” (wise) in the Qur'an, and this pairing is an indication of the wisdom of God's speech; God, who is Mighty and Powerful, is at the same time all-Wise.

However, in Surat ul Shu'ara', this attribute of God has been mentioned in conjunction with another attribute: *rahim* (merciful). In fact, these two attributes recur in successive verses in this chapter; verses that recount the abominable behaviour of communities who rose in defiance against the Prophets sent to them, and hindered their attempts to guide the people.

In addition to the usage of the two terms side by side, their repetition is also instructive and noteworthy, as we will now explain:

Surat ul Shu'ara' mentions the incidents that invariably occurred with the Prophets of God. In this chapter the account of Prophet Musa (A) and Fir'aun is narrated first, and then after relating the accounts of other Prophets, namely Prophets Ibrahim (A), Nuh (A), Hud (A), Salih (A), Lut (A) and Shu'aib (A), the Qur'an talks of their tireless and determined efforts to propagate their messages, which contained the most fundamental and deep truths, all over the world.

And by recounting their struggle against the polytheism, corruption and oppression of their time, the verse consoles the Prophet of Islam (S) regarding the unpleasantness and difficulties that he was facing,

and strengthen his heart with the following beautiful phrase, “so rely on the most-Mighty and Merciful.”
(*wa tawakkal ‘al’i ‘aziz I-rahim*)

In all the verses in which the terms *‘aziz* and *rahim* are mentioned together, the subject is the Divine retribution against the stubborn disbelievers for their lifelong recalcitrance and corrupt conduct and for rejecting the truth despite witnessing clear proofs. Their continuation down this path of darkness and their constant transgressions ultimately caused their hearts to be sealed, and left them to forever wander in darkness.

A question that arises here is: Why does the Qur’an use the terms *‘aziz* and *rahim* to describe God, the Holy, after describing the descent of His wrath and the deserved punishment of a nation who were destroyed for their atheism and defiance?

To answer this question, we must understand the true meaning contained in these two Divine attributes and in particular, the significance of their repetition in Surat ul Shu‘ara’. Additionally, we need to uncover what message there is for mankind in the usage of the two terms in juxtaposition and what lesson we can learn from it.

We know that amongst man’s deviant inclinations is his selfish nature and his love of power. In human society we frequently see individuals who have an inflated sense of self-importance and are fond of exaggerating their achievements. This perverse inclination only serves to mislead and further increases the domination of base desires over the intellect of the individual and brings about many misfortunes for him. Of course, this quality is weaker in some individuals than in others.

Even though there are individuals whose actions in life are principally motivated by noble intentions, who are able to distinguish the sensual elements of their predisposition from their true and sincere aspirations, and try hard to protect themselves from the allure of extreme and undesirable emotions, such individuals are very few in number and are rarely found amongst the general population in society. This is because to achieve such a harmonious balance requires a hard and determined struggle against the soul.

On the other hand, there are many who, due to their weak morals and desire to gain whatever limited power they can lay their hands on, will be prepared to sanction any transgression or destruction that will give them what they seek. They will react violently against any authority who attempts to forestall them while they try to slake their insatiable thirst for power. This is the nature of those who seek to rule over others, who always create in their minds an image of a perfect role model which satisfies their feeling of superiority, and then try to mould and change their persona accordingly.

We also clearly see that high ambition and power-seeking is always accompanied by a marked intolerance. This is not only limited to the case of men of power at the head of one or several countries, but is evident in the leaders of a township or village or even a small department. Even the leader of the smallest group is extremely sensitive and intolerant of the smallest infraction from those under him.

On the other hand, there is a close relationship between power and mercilessness; usually, the more the power a person has, the less merciful he becomes. He will blow out of proportion, and become enraged at, the smallest resistance to his power, he will harbour feelings of rage and revenge, and respond to any defiance of his authority in an intemperate manner, and this merciless behaviour will even extend, in the case of disobedience, to those closest to him.

The Prophets of God taught mankind how to contemplate about the truth and freed them from the shackles of customs and baseless ancient rituals. Their opening message, which illuminated the horizons of human thought in every generation, was the call to *tawhid* (unity of God) and the repudiation of every form of polytheism and idolatry; they emphasised that salvation only lay in the belief in one God. Indeed, throughout history, every Divine caller has begun his message with the teaching of the unity, divinity and lordship of God. The understanding of this primary reality compels man, by moving on this divine path, to recover his footing and to attain perfection in harmony with the rest of existence.

The messengers of God bore the terrible tribulations that were directed at them with patience and fortitude so that, by passing on God's message, they could faithfully discharge the duty of ensuring the felicity of mankind that had been placed on their shoulders by the Creator.

Thereafter, for the salvation of their communities from the grip of spiritual malaise in an environment where the foundations of spirituality and morality were crumbling and which had dragged mankind down from their true and noble state, they were commanded to educate their people and make them aware of their potential. They informed them that throughout the life of this world, man is in constant danger of lapsing into error, so he should strive towards the source of goodness and felicity, and distance himself from his previous conduct and reform himself.

The Prophets did not expect any recompense for their efforts in combating the corruption in their societies, not even a word of thanks. They all stated, "Our recompense is with God, the Lord of the universe". It is here that the excellence of their personalities and their selfless characters can be clearly appreciated.

Amongst the other objectives of the Prophets was to controvert the worship of power and excessive selfishness and to transform the minds of individuals so that they could work continuously to become free of their shackles. In this way, people could gather their strength and work together to create for themselves a meaningful destiny, because in the course of history, irreparable damage and loss has been caused to humanity by selfish and power hungry men.

The message of the verses of Surat ul Shu'ara' is that those arrogant, selfish and rebellious communities who knowingly turned away from the path of salvation, and obstinately persisted in their vain ways were seized by God's punishment and retribution and were obliterated from the pages of existence; these were communities who opposed the Prophets of God with impudence and ignored their advice and rejected the Divine message with satanic impunity.

For this reason, day by day their lives grew bleaker and the dossier of their transgressions grew longer until they closed all the doors of return behind them, so that no hope for their rehabilitation remained and no more respite to purify their souls and gain a reprieve from God's punishment was available. They had easily given up the opportunities that had been granted to them and had now become enmeshed in a trap of their own making; a trap that was only filled with Divine punishment and retribution.

After every mention in this chapter of the ignominious end and destruction of a rebellious nation, the Qur'an closes the account by recounting God's attribute of might and power (*'aziz*), but also immediately adds the attribute of mercy (*rahim*). From a cursory glance at the verse it would appear that the mercy of God has nothing to do with His punishment, and it might be more appropriate to cite the attribute of vengeance or anger or omnipotence of God.

To appreciate the wisdom hidden in the verse we must first review the lives of the Prophets of God; those who had access to the richest and greatest source of information and knowledge, so that we can understand how their elevated spiritual station is achieved.

One of the ways by which the Prophets (A) were raised in station was by their resistance against the perversion, disbelief and obstinacy of their communities, which caused them a great deal of spiritual distress. Those messengers who were more resolute in the face of ordeals and tribulations rose higher in station in God's estimation.

Consider Prophet Nuh (A), who lived in the farthest reaches of history; he spent 950 years of his thousand year life in propagating God's religion. His was a constant, difficult and long struggle. He tirelessly battled against the idolatry and the foolish behaviour of his fatuous community. Without losing his temper he ceaselessly tried to lead them to the truth by imparting spiritual teaching.

During these long years, this great Prophet (A) had no helper and support except his reliance on God, yet nothing could stop his efforts and determination to guide his people in the different facets of their lives. He did not show any reservations in discharging his responsibilities and propagating his mission; he never hesitated in plainly stating his message to a hostile and ignorant audience. Despite all his long endeavours, he did not receive a positive reply from his nation; instead the people of this ignorant and morally decadent society persisted in their rejection and fanatically pursued their practice of polytheism.

This Prophet of God continued with all this sincere effort for a prolonged time, despite the relentless strain on his spirit, in the aspiration that he would be able to get through to his rebellious people and reform their corrupt ways, but these hopes never materialized. Instead, as time went by, their defiance and disrespect only increased, and they sank ever deeper into the swamp of ignorance and immorality. Finally, towards the end of his life, when he lost all hope that his people would ever change, he cursed them.

Other Prophets (A) had similar experiences with their people, (forbearance and resoluteness in the face of the defiance of their nation and their refusal to accept the Divine message, until they would completely

lose hope).

In the main, after passing through the three stages mentioned below, Prophets (A) would finally imprecate their communities, who had resolved to continue in their disbelief and totally given their lives over to Satan. The Prophets would finally pray to God to send down His punishment on them:

1. Great patience and fortitude in the face of disbelief, obstinacy and insults of their people.
2. They would show the kind of forbearance that an ordinary person could not exhibit.
3. Despair and total loss of hope in the reformation of their people, after continuous efforts to guide them. When all their efforts and ideas have been in vain and the people persist in their disobedience of God's message.
4. When the polytheists would persistently challenge them to bring about God's punishment.

Only when these stages had been crossed, would the Prophets (A) [legitimately] seek God's avengement and retribution. In the account of Prophet Yunus (A) we read that he did not exhibit sufficient patience and forbearance. When his efforts at guiding his people were met with ignorant derision and rejection and they persisted with their misguided rituals, he lost patience with them and before he was convinced that there was no more he could do with them, he resorted to invoking God's punishment on them.

Due to his hasty despair and lack of the necessary perseverance in discharging his duties, God cast him into the belly of the whale and severely censured him to make him realize that, in the course of carrying out his mission, if he had to face frustration, defeat and even torture, he should resolutely see his mission through and stay in place. The Qur'an states that other Prophets had this steadfastness:

وَأِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِدْرِيسَ وَذَا الْكِفْلِ كُلٌّ مِنَ الصَّابِرِينَ

***And Ismail and Idris and Zulkifl; all were of the patient ones [when delivering their messages].
(al-Anbiya', 21/85)***

In the end, when the community of Yunus (A) witnessed the signs of God's wrath, they were overcome with abject fear and helplessness, and realized their error just in time. They became remorseful at their previous sinful conduct and fell on their knees begging for God's forgiveness and sincerely pleaded with Him to lift away His impending punishment. God accepted their appeal and forgave them and rescinded his punishment.

From this episode we clearly see how, in the face of the defiance and disobedience of mankind, God patiently keeps the doors of His mercy constantly open for man to enter through.

It is true that the mercy and grace of God is universal and widespread, but this does not negate the possibility of punishment and retribution. The mercy and endless blessings of God must not be misunderstood to mean that in His sacred presence, the virtuous and the evil, the oppressed and the oppressors are equal.

If God, the Most High, whose dominion prevails over every ruler and who has complete authority over every defiant tyrant does not punish disobedience, and humiliate every transgressor, and overlook the conduct of every corrupt individual, then justice and accountability will lose its meaning. Should God give sanctuary to the oppressors and deal with them mercifully? Is not the fire of hell the fairest requital for the defiant sinner? And finally, it is the essence of justice that an atom's weight of good or an atom's weight of evil should not be overlooked.

One of the clear manifestations of God's omnipotence and mercy over His ungrateful and disobedient servants is that after the coming of the Prophet of Islam (S), He has stopped visiting retribution in the earth and postponed it to the day of Judgement. In fact, even in the case of the Masih (A), that great Prophet who was the "spirit of God", who was subjected to a variety of tribulations and finally marked for death, God did not punish the perpetrators in this world and reserved the punishment for their defiance and disobedience for the day of judgement.

Historians have acknowledged that in the early days of his prophethood, his people persecuted the great Prophet of Islam (S) – the Prophet who was the Mercy to the worlds (*rahmatun li'l 'alamin*) – mercilessly and sabotaged his activities under different pretexts and tried to subvert his mission by sending ruffians and troublemakers to heckle and harangue him; in short, they spared no effort to harass him, belie him and defame his noble character. Throughout all this, he maintained his composure and exhibited tremendous patience. God also gave these oppressors respite and did not send down His punishment on them in this world.

By studying all the matters discussed above, and keeping in mind the events that have occurred throughout the long course of history, we discover that the communities who were caught up in God's retribution in this world usually lived in cities with very limited populations. After the followers of the Prophets left the scene where the punishment was to come, so that they would remain immune from God's wrath, we may say that the remainder, who were comprised of the corrupt, defiant and disbelieving individuals of the community, were relatively few.

In other words, those who were destroyed by God's punishment during the entire history of the ancient Prophets, which comprised thousands of years, were a very small number of individuals compared to for example, the casualties and extensive bloodshed that has occurred in various wars in the world, or that nowadays are caused by countries seeking power, or even for no apparent reason at all, where scores of people are killed.

In our time, we are witnessing widespread outbreaks of carnage in various corners of the globe due to

the selfish oppression of weaker nations; every one of these wars is a testament to the crimes of individuals who have hunger for power.

This is while God's retributions and punishment of the defiant in the past – even though in a small region, and to preserve human values and to remove oppressors who were not prepared to obey God's directives at any cost, had already come down. In addition to punishing the guilty it was a warning and a lesson for others, which has stopped many from continuing on the path of the arrogant and the degenerate.

The fact is that from all wars, whose real motives have been to satisfy the selfishness of warmongering individuals, and which have no purpose except gaining power, one cannot expect any positive outcome; certainly not an outcome that would engender an environment in which piety and goodness would flourish and which would bring about enlightenment and virtue. In fact these kinds of wars only bring in their wake misery and corruption, and the resulting hardship and difficulties for the civil population should not be ignored.

On the other hand, if those who turned their back on the truth and denied themselves the protection of the true sanctuary, immediately received the retribution for their actions and the whip of death and doom came down on them at once and this practice was established for the unbelievers and sinners in this world, and God did not delay their punishment only until the day of judgement, what then would become of mankind?

Now let us take into account various factors of the modern age, such as the increase in the number of cities and the population of the world, the speed of communication, the ease with which the teachings of the Prophet (S) can be disseminated and the duty of making the message of Islam reach all corners of the world, even while most nations are steeped in atheism and corruption, or in other words, immersed in the modern version of idolatry where the arrogant and their disciples assume a hostile stance against God, which is an unforgivable insolence. Now in such an environment, which is full of widespread mischief and lack of restraint, if God was to decide to manifest His wrath and to punish those who were culpable in this very world, a great multitude of the world's population would be destroyed and annihilated from the pages of existence.

Next let us bring to mind the limitless power of God, in front of which the limited and temporary power of every imperious ruler in the world pales into insignificance, a power which cannot be counted or quantified, and the whole grand universe exists due to a negligible fraction of the power, ability and greatness of the Creator and due to His will. This power is reflected in the mirror of existence that illuminates every atom in the cosmos.

The chief of the believers, Ali (A) has said, "O Allah! We cannot aspire to know the real extent of Your greatness ... We see Your creation and wonder over it because of Your might, and describe it as (a result of) Your great authority; whereas what is hidden from us...is far greater. 1

At no time or place, in the past or present, has it ever been seen that a powerful ruler, dominant over all affairs in his personal domain – not out of social or political considerations or for seeking fame, but only because of a sincere affection and the love of mankind which is ingrained in his character – always acts in a humanitarian and moral manner and overlooks the insubordination and defiance of his opponents who are under his power; in fact he goes so far as to treat those who oppose and defy him with clemency and envelop them with his affection without expecting any positive reaction from them. History cannot present any powerful ruler, throughout the ages, with such characteristics, although the issue of the reign of the Prophets of God are special cases which we are not considering at this time.

Therefore the two attributes of “power” and “mercy” can never be united in oppressive rulers.

It is here that we should ponder deeply so that we can properly appreciate the enormity of the manifestation of *‘aziz* and *rahim*, these two attributes of God, towards mankind. We need to become more and more familiar with His power and mercy, especially towards those who dare to be disobedient and sinful and defiant in front of His Grandeur; one way to understand this is to ponder over His repeated emphasis in all the foregoing verses, of these two of His great attributes. We thus realise that true Power and Mercy belongs to God alone. Indeed,

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ

And most surely your Lord is the Mighty, the Merciful. (al-Shu‘ara’, 26/68)

1. Nahj al-Balagha, sermon 160

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