

Sūrah 21: al-Anbiyā'

Period of Revelation

Both the subject matter and the style of the Sūrah indicate that it was sent down in the third stage of the life of the Prophet at Makkah (see introduction to Sūrah 6).

Subject and Topics

This Sūrah discusses the conflict between the Prophet and the chiefs of Makkah which was rampant at the time of its Revelation and answers those objections and doubts which were being put forward concerning his Prophethood and the doctrines of Tawhid and the Hereafter. The chiefs of Makkah have also been rebuked for their machinations against the Prophet and warned of the evil consequences of their wicked activities. They have been admonished to give up their indifference and heedlessness that they were showing about the Message. At the end of the Sūrah they have been told that the person whom they considered to be a "distress and affliction" had in reality come to them as a blessing.

Main Themes

In v. 1-47 the following themes have been discussed in particular :

1. The objection of the disbelievers that a human being could not be a Messenger and therefore they could not accept Muhammad as a Prophet has been refuted.
2. They have been taken to task for raising multifarious and contradictory objections against the Prophet and the Qur'ān.
3. Their wrong conception of life has been proved to be false because it was responsible for their indifferent and heedless attitude towards the Message of the Prophet. They believed that life was merely a sport and pastime and had no purpose behind or before it and there was no accountability or reward or punishment.
4. The main cause of the conflict between the disbelievers and the Prophet was their insistence on the doctrine of Shirk (polytheism) and antagonism to the Doctrine of Tawhid (Oneness of God). So the doctrine of Shirk has been refuted and the doctrine of Tawhid reinforced by weighty and impressive though brief arguments.
5. Arguments and admonitions have been used to remove another misunderstanding of theirs. They presumed that Muhammad was a false prophet and his warnings of a scourge from God were empty threats just because no scourge was visiting them in spite of their persistent rejection of the Prophet. In v. 48-91 instances have been cited from the important events of the life stories of the Prophets to show that all the Prophets who were sent by God were human beings and had all the characteristics of a man except those which were exclusive to Prophethood. They had no share in Godhead and they had to implore God to fulfil each and every necessity of theirs.
6. All the Prophets had to pass through distress and affliction; their opponents did their worst to thwart their mission but in spite of it they came out successful by the extraordinary succour from God.
7. All the Prophets had one and the same 'way of life' the same as was being presented by Muhammad and that was the only Right Way of Life and all other ways invented and introduced by mischievous people were utterly wrong.

In v. 92-106 it has been declared that only those who follow the Right Way will come out successful in the final judgment of God and those who discard it shall meet with the worst consequences. In v. 107-112 the people have been told that it is a great favour of God that He has sent His Messenger to inform them beforehand of this Reality and that those who consider his coming to be an affliction instead of a blessing are foolish people.

Sūrah 21: al-Anbiyā'⁸⁰⁸

In the Name of God, the Most Compassionate,
the Most Merciful

1. [The time of] their account has approached for the people, while they are in heedlessness turning away.
2. No mention [i.e., revelation] comes to them anew from their Lord except that they listen to it while they are at play
3. With their hearts distracted. And those who do wrong conceal their private conversation, [saying], "Is this [Prophet] except a human being like you? So would you approach magic while you are aware [of it]?"
4. He [the Prophet] said, "My Lord knows whatever is said throughout the heaven and earth, and He is the Hearing, the Knowing."
5. But they say, "[The revelation is but] a mixture of false dreams; rather, he has invented it; rather, he is a poet. So let him bring us a sign just as the previous [messengers] were sent [with miracles]."
6. Not a [single] city which We destroyed believed before them,⁸⁰⁹ so will they believe?
7. And We sent not before you, [O Muhammad], except men to whom We revealed [the message], so ask the people of the message [i.e., former scriptures] if you do not know.
8. And We did not make them [i.e., the prophets] forms not eating food,⁸¹⁰ nor were they immortal [on earth].
9. Then⁸¹¹ We fulfilled for them the promise, and We saved them and whom We willed and destroyed the transgressors.
10. We have certainly sent down to you a Book [i.e., the Qur'an] in which is your mention.⁸¹² Then will you not reason?
11. And how many a city which was unjust⁸¹³ have We shattered and produced after it another people.
12. And when they [i.e., its inhabitants] perceived Our punishment, at once they fled from it.
13. [Some angels said], "Do not flee but return to where you were given luxury and to your homes - perhaps you will be questioned."⁸¹⁴
14. They said, "O woe to us! Indeed, we were wrongdoers."
15. And that declaration of theirs did not cease until We made them [as] a harvest [mowed down], extinguished [like a fire].
16. And We did not create the heaven and earth and that between them in play.

⁸¹⁰ Like the angels. Rather, they were human beings with human attributes.

⁸¹¹ Once they had conveyed the message.

⁸¹² This implies the honour of having been mentioned or addressed. Another meaning is "your reminder."

⁸¹³ i.e., its inhabitants persisting in wrongdoing.

⁸¹⁴ About what happened to you. This is said to them in sarcasm and ridicule.

⁸⁰⁸ *Al-Anbiyā'*: The Prophets.

⁸⁰⁹ Even though they had witnessed signs and miracles.

17. Had We intended to take a diversion,⁸¹⁵ We could have taken it from [what is] with Us - if [indeed] We were to do so.
18. Rather, We dash the truth upon falsehood, and it destroys it,⁸¹⁶ and thereupon it departs. And for you is destruction from that which you describe.⁸¹⁷
19. To Him belongs whoever is in the heavens and the earth. And those near Him [i.e., the angels] are not prevented by arrogance from His worship, nor do they tire.
20. They exalt [Him] night and day [and] do not slacken.
21. Or have they [i.e., men] taken for themselves gods from the earth who resurrect [the dead]?
22. Had there been within them [i.e., the heavens and earth] gods besides God, they both would have been ruined. So exalted is God, Lord of the Throne, above what they describe.
23. He is not questioned about what He does, but they will be questioned.
24. Or have they taken gods besides Him? Say, [O Muhammad], "Produce your proof. This [Qur'ān] is the message for those with me and the message of those before me."⁸¹⁸ But most of them do not know the truth, so they are turning away.
25. And We sent not before you any messenger except that We revealed to him that, "There is no deity except Me, so worship Me."
26. And they say, "The Most Merciful has taken a son." Exalted is He! Rather, they⁸¹⁹ are [but] honoured servants.
27. They cannot precede Him in word, and they act by His command.
28. He knows what is [presently] before them and what will be after them,⁸²⁰ and they cannot intercede except on behalf of one whom He approves. And they, from fear of Him, are apprehensive.
29. And whoever of them should say, "Indeed, I am a god besides Him"—that one We would recompense with Hell. Thus do We recompense the wrongdoers.
30. Have those who disbelieved not considered that the heavens and the earth were a joined entity, and We separated them and made from water every living thing? Then will they not believe?
31. And We placed within the earth firmly set mountains, lest it should shift with them, and We made therein [mountain] passes [as] roads that they might be guided.
32. And We made the sky a protected ceiling, but they, from its signs,⁸²¹ are turning away.
33. And it is He who created the night and the day and the sun and the moon; all

⁸¹⁵ Such as a wife or a child.

⁸¹⁶ Literally, "strikes its brain," disabling or killing it.

⁸¹⁷ Of untruth concerning God, particularly here the claim that He has a son or other "partner" in divinity.

⁸¹⁸ All previous prophets called for the worship of God alone.

⁸¹⁹ Those they claim to be "children" of God, such as the angels, Ezra, Jesus etc.

⁸²⁰ See footnote to 2:255.

⁸²¹ The signs present in the heavens.

- [heavenly bodies] in an orbit are swimming.
34. And We did not grant to any man before you eternity [on earth]; so if you die - would they be eternal?
35. Every soul will taste death. And We test you with evil and with good as trial; and to Us you will be returned.
36. And when those who disbelieve see you, [O Muhammad], they take you not except in ridicule, [saying], "Is this the one who mentions [i.e., insults] your gods?" And they are, at the mention of the Most Merciful, disbelievers.
37. Man was created of haste [i.e., impatience]. I will show you My signs [i.e., vengeance], so do not impatiently urge Me.
38. And they say, "When is this promise, if you should be truthful?"
39. If those who disbelieved but knew the time when they will not avert the Fire from their faces or from their backs and they will not be aided...⁸²²
40. Rather, it will come to them unexpectedly and bewilder them, and they will not be able to repel it, nor will they be reprieved.
41. And already were messengers ridiculed before you, but those who mocked them were enveloped by what they used to ridicule.
42. Say, "Who can protect you at night or by day from the Most Merciful?" But
- they are, from the remembrance of their Lord, turning away.
43. Or do they have gods to defend them other than Us? They are unable [even] to help themselves, nor can they be protected from Us.
44. But, [on the contrary], We have provided good things for these [disbelievers] and their fathers until life was prolonged for them. Then do they not see that We set upon the land, reducing it from its borders?⁸²³ So it is they who will overcome?
45. Say, "I only warn you by revelation." But the deaf do not hear the call when they are warned.
46. And if [as much as] a whiff of the punishment of your Lord should touch them, they would surely say, "O woe to us! Indeed, we have been wrongdoers."
47. And We place the scales of justice for the Day of Resurrection, so no soul will be treated unjustly at all. And if there is [even] the weight of a mustard seed,⁸²⁴ We will bring it forth. And sufficient are We as accountant.
48. And We had already given Moses and Aaron the criterion and a light and a reminder⁸²⁵ for the righteous
49. Who fear their Lord unseen,⁸²⁶ while they are of the Hour apprehensive.

⁸²² The completion of the sentence is understood to be "...they would not be asking in disbelief and ridicule to be shown the punishment."

⁸²³ See footnote to 13:41.

⁸²⁴ i.e., anything as small or insignificant as a mustard seed.

⁸²⁵ These are three qualities of the Torah.

⁸²⁶ Which can mean "Him being unseen" by them or "though they are unseen" by others.

50. And this [Qur'ān] is a blessed message which We have sent down. Then are you with it unacquainted?⁸²⁷
51. And We had certainly given Abraham his sound judgement before,⁸²⁸ and We were of him well-Knowing
52. When he said to his father and his people, "What are these statues to which you are devoted?"
53. They said, "We found our fathers worshippers of them."
54. He said, "You were certainly, you and your fathers, in manifest error."
55. They said, "Have you come to us with truth, or are you of those who jest?"
56. He said, "[No], rather, your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth who created them, and I, to that, am of those who testify.
57. And [I swear] by God, I will surely plan against your idols after you have turned and gone away."
58. So he made them into fragments, except a large one among them, that they might return to it [and question].
59. They said, "Who has done this to our gods? Indeed, he is of the wrongdoers."
60. They said, "We heard a young man mention them who is called Abraham."
61. They said, "Then bring him before the eyes of the people that they may testify."⁸²⁹
62. They said, "Have you done this to our gods, O Abraham?"
63. He said, "Rather, this - the largest of them - did it, so ask them, if they should [be able to] speak."
64. So they returned to [blaming] themselves and said [to each other], "Indeed, you are the wrongdoers."
65. Then they reversed themselves,⁸³⁰ [saying], "You have already known that these do not speak!"
66. He said, "Then do you worship instead of God that which does not benefit you at all or harm you?"
67. Uff⁸³¹ to you and to what you worship instead of God. Then will you not use reason?"
68. They said, "Burn him and support your gods — if you are to act."
69. We [i.e., God] said, "O fire, be coolness and safety upon Abraham."
70. And they intended for him a plan [i.e., harm], but We made them the greatest losers.
71. And We delivered him and Lot to the land which We had blessed for the worlds [i.e., peoples].
72. And We gave him Isaac and Jacob in addition, and all [of them] We made righteous.

⁸²⁷ i.e., pretending ignorance, disapproving or refusing to acknowledge it?

⁸²⁸ i.e., before Moses. God had guided him from early youth.

⁸²⁹ To what they heard him say. It may also mean "...that they may witness [what will be done to him as punishment]."

⁸³⁰ After first admitting to their error, they were seized by pride and obstinacy.

⁸³¹ An exclamation of anger and displeasure.

73. And We made them leaders guiding by Our command. And We inspired to them the doing of good deeds, establishment of prayer, and giving of zakāh; and they were worshippers of Us.
74. And to Lot We gave judgement and knowledge, and We saved him from the city that was committing wicked deeds. Indeed, they were a people of evil, defiantly disobedient.
75. And We admitted him into Our mercy. Indeed, he was of the righteous.
76. And [mention] Noah, when he called [to God]⁸³² before [that time], so We responded to him and saved him and his family from the great affliction [i.e., the flood].
77. And We aided [i.e., saved] him from the people who denied Our signs. Indeed, they were a people of evil, so We drowned them, all together.
78. And [mention] David and Solomon, when they judged concerning the field - when the sheep of a people overran it [at night],⁸³³ and We were witness to their judgement.
79. And We gave understanding of it [i.e., the case] to Solomon, and to each [of them] We gave judgement and knowledge. And We subjected the mountains to exalt [Us], along with David and [also] the birds. And We were doing [that].⁸³⁴
80. And We taught him the fashioning of coats of armor to protect you from
- your [enemy in] battle. So will you then be grateful?
81. And to Solomon [We subjected] the wind, blowing forcefully, proceeding by his command toward the land which We had blessed. And We are ever, of all things, Knowing.
82. And of the devils [i.e., jinn] were those who dived for him and did work other than that. And We were of them a guardian.⁸³⁵
83. And [mention] Job, when he called to his Lord, "Indeed, adversity has touched me, and you are the Most Merciful of the merciful."
84. So We responded to him and removed what afflicted him of adversity. And We gave him [back] his family and the like thereof with them as mercy from Us and a reminder for the worshippers [of God].
85. And [mention] Ishmael and Idrees and Dhul-Kifl; all were of the patient.
86. And We admitted them into Our mercy. Indeed, they were of the righteous.
87. And [mention] the man of the fish [i.e., Jonah], when he went off in anger⁸³⁶ and thought that We would not decree [anything] upon him.⁸³⁷ And he called out within the darknesses,⁸³⁸ "There is no deity except You; exalted are You.

⁸³² i.e., supplicated against his people who had persisted in denial and animosity. See 17:26-28.

⁸³³ Eating and destroying the crops.

⁸³⁴ Meaning that God has always been capable of accomplishing whatever He wills.

⁸³⁵ Preventing any disobedience or deviation by them from Solomon's instructions and protecting him from being harmed by them.

⁸³⁶ At the disbelief of his people.

⁸³⁷ Or "would not restrict him" in the belly of the fish.

⁸³⁸ That of the night, of the sea, and of the fish's interior.

- Indeed, I have been of the wrongdoers.”
88. So We responded to him and saved him from the distress. And thus do We save the believers.
89. And [mention] Zechariah, when he called to his Lord, “My Lord, do not leave me alone [with no heir], while You are the best of inheritors.”
90. So We responded to him, and We gave to him John, and amended for him his wife. Indeed, they used to hasten to good deeds and supplicate Us in hope and fear, and they were to Us humbly submissive.
91. And [mention] the one who guarded her chastity [i.e., Mary], so We blew into her [garment] through Our angel [i.e., Gabriel], and We made her and her son a sign for the worlds.
92. Indeed this, your religion, is one religion,⁸³⁹ and I am your Lord, so worship Me.
93. And [yet] they divided their affair [i.e., that of their religion] among themselves,⁸⁴⁰ [but] all to Us will return.
94. So whoever does righteous deeds while he is a believer — no denial will there be for his effort,⁸⁴¹ and indeed We [i.e., Our angels], of it, are recorders.
95. And there is prohibition upon [the people of] a city which We have destroyed that they will [ever] return⁸⁴²
96. Until when [the dam of] Gog and Magog has been opened and they, from every elevation, descend
97. And [when] the true promise [i.e., the resurrection] has approached; then suddenly the eyes of those who disbelieved will be staring [in horror, while they say], “O woe to us; we had been unmindful of this; rather, we were wrongdoers.”
98. Indeed, you [disbelievers] and what you worship other than God are the firewood of Hell. You will be coming to [enter] it.
99. Had these [false deities] been [actual] gods, they would not have come to it, but all are eternal therein.
100. For them therein is heavy sighing, and they therein will not hear.
101. Indeed, those for whom the best [reward] has preceded from Us — they are from it far removed.
102. They will not hear its sound, while they are, in that which their souls desire, abiding eternally.
103. They will not be grieved by the greatest terror,⁸⁴³ and the angels will meet them, [saying], “This is your Day which you have been promised” -
104. The Day when We will fold the heaven like the folding of a [written] sheet for

⁸³⁹ i.e., a collective way of life or course of conduct followed by a community.

⁸⁴⁰ Becoming sects and denominations.

⁸⁴¹ Such a person will not be deprived of his due reward.

⁸⁴² They cannot return to this world, nor can they repent to God.

⁸⁴³ The events of the Last Hour or of the Resurrection.

the records. As We began the first creation, We will repeat it. [That is] a promise binding upon Us. Indeed, We will do it.⁸⁴⁴

whose help is sought against that which you describe.”⁸⁴⁹

105. And We have already written in the book [of Psalms]⁸⁴⁵ after the [previous] mention⁸⁴⁶ that the land [of Paradise] is inherited by My righteous servants.
106. Indeed, in this [Qurʾān] is notification for a worshipping people.
107. And We have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds.
108. Say, “It is only revealed to me that your god is but one God; so will you be Muslims [in submission to Him]?”
109. But if they turn away, then say, “I have announced to [all of] you equally.⁸⁴⁷ And I know not whether near or far is that which you are promised.
110. Indeed, He knows what is declared of speech, and He knows what you conceal.
111. And I know not; perhaps it⁸⁴⁸ is a trial for you and enjoyment for a time.”
112. [The Prophet] has said, “My Lord, judge [between us] in truth. And our Lord is the Most Merciful, the one

⁸⁴⁴ More literally, “Indeed, We are ever doers” of what We will.

⁸⁴⁵ *Az-Zabūr* can also mean “scriptures” in general.

⁸⁴⁶ i.e., the Torah. The “mention” may also refer to the original inscription with God, i.e., the Preserved Slate (*al-Lawḥ al-Mahfūṭh*).

⁸⁴⁷ The Prophet made this message known to all people, not concealing any of it from anyone or preferring any group over another.

⁸⁴⁸ The postponement of punishment.

⁸⁴⁹ i.e., their lies and disbelief.