



# THE MEANING OF THE SURAH AL-KAWTHAR IN THE QUR'AN

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The shortest Surah of the Qur'an is the 108th. In the Sahih International translation and in transcription it reads:

*bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi*

(In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful)

*al-Kawthar. innā aṭaynāka l-kawara*<sup>a</sup>

(Indeed, We have granted you, ),

*fa-ṣalli li-rabbika wa-nḥar*

(So pray to your Lord and sacrifice ).

*'innā šāniaka huwa l-abtar*<sup>u</sup>

(Indeed, your enemy is the one cut off).

On the basis of this very short textual segment, one of many of such disparate origin that were later compiled into the book we know today as the "Qur'an," almost all principles and methods of historico-critical textual interpretation can be demonstrated. The common Muslim understanding is that the three verses of Surah 108 refer to an event in Muhammad's life, who is then regarded as the addressee of this urgent revelation. The "one who hates you" (*šāniaka*) mentioned in verse three is then in this view his adversary, whom God apparently cursed. But let us now treat this short Sura verse by verse in order to show some textual and exegetical problems, pars pro toto, for the holy book of Islam in its entirety and to offer possible explanations: often, the usual modern translations are by and large based on exegetical understandings of classical (secondary) Islamic commentary culture, and as such are mere speculations or exemplifications.

Firstly, for the introductory formula, the Basmala, which in the Qur'an, with the exception, generally speaking, of the first Surah, is not counted as a verse, much could be said. For Muslims it is controversial whether this formula belongs to the revealed text of all Surahs, or whether it is an introductory formula later seen as necessary, a posterior editorial addition. *Bismi*, literally "in the name," here as *in nomine Dei*, is a widespread formula and not at all specifically Islamic. The two ornamental adjectives following the name of God "Allāh" are also of pre-Islamic, of Christian and Jewish ('Ha-Rachaman') origin (originally "uterus" = *σπλάγγνα*). But as far as the name of God Allāh itself is concerned, it should not be translated as "God," despite the common objection that Muslims, Jews and Christians believe in the one God, the same God. But this is obviously a logical fallacy: etymological

relationship does not mean that the common term denotes an identical entity.

In the initial two verses, the addressed person is, according to traditional Islamic exegesis, reminded of the benefits (verse 1) rendered by Allāh and the resultant obligations (verse 2). Almost all non-Muslim explanations follow this received interpretation without criticism. Wherever possible, the underlying exegetical method tries to see in Quranic sentences a reference to the hypostasised founding figure of Islam, i.e., Muhammad, and alleged events in his life in the sense of the "occasions of Revelation" (*Asbāb an-nuzūl*). In other words, a prophetic hagiography was secondarily read into the Qur'anic text.

Although this understanding of these verses has gradually become generally accepted, it is ultimately based on unfounded assumptions, since the three key terms on which this interpretation is based, namely *al-kawar* (usually "the fullness"), *nḥar* (usually imperative sing. "sacrifice") and *al-abtar* (usually verbatim "the cut-off") are only found here in the Qur'an (so-called hapax legomena). Their actual meanings are therefore difficult to determine; and different explanations, mostly without much linguistic support, can be found in the commentary literature. *Kawar* in verse 1 is either interpreted as "abundance" or as a proper name. In the first case—according to Muslim tradition, this term also comprehends the entirety of divine benefits, but especially the revelations of which the Qur'an consists—the word would then have an unusual linguistic form, since in Arabic this is the noun *kathīr*, which, by the way, is well attested in the Qur'an.

However, here the diphthong -au- (compare in English "Beer" vs. "Bear"), remains without any convincing explanation. The second interpretation follows the "proven" pattern of explanation: "If you cannot understand or interpret the word, then it must be a proper name." In this explanation, which is dealt with extensively, especially in various hadiths, i.e., in later sayings attributed to Mohammed, the word is understood as the name of one of the rivers of paradise or its source, to which believing Muslims are led on the Day of Judgement. The last unusual Arabic word *al-abtar*, perhaps literally "cut off", i.e., either from Allāh's goodness or—from descendants (i.e., emasculated, or literally "dickless"). How "sacrifice" (*nḥar*) is to be understood in the light of Islamic orthopraxis remains obscure.

Since the orthography of the early Qur'ans did not use the diacritical points that distinguish the consonants—i.e., these are secondary—the next step, even if seen as controversial by some nowadays, can be to attempt to read the respective letters without or with different pointing. The many "linguistic-alchemical" details necessary for this, such as the shifting of reading points and the exchange of vowels (also added later), cannot be dealt with in detail here.

1) *Kawar* would then be an Aramaic borrowing from *kuttārā*/كوترة (consonantal *kwtr*, i.e. according to the Arabic Form كوتر testified here) meaning "Duration; steadfastness; persistence."

2) *Naḥara* (ن-ح-ر) is read as Syriac *ngar*/نجار (in Arabic script ن-ج-ر - both have the same consonant skeleton ; namely, "be persistent, steadfastness) ن-ح-ر

3) *Abtar*/ابتار without diacritics is identical to *atbar*: (ا-ن-ر), probably from an Aramaic root אבט often used in the Qur'an "completely smashed, destroyed, ruined;" or the Arabic form of this root *br*/تبر - also identical when written without dots.

By this comparative linguistic approach, common in philology and especially biblical studies, otherwise unattested lexemes are avoided—the influence of Syro-Aramaic vocabulary, especially in the domain of theological terms found in the Qur'an is well-known. The resulting text reads:

1. We have given you firmness!
2. So pray perseveringly to your Lord!
3. Truly the one who hates you (scil. the devil) will be shattered!

One might consider reading the first word of the third verse as *anna* and not as *inna* <sup>ن</sup> *inna*, i.e., "That truly the one who hates you will be shattered".

If one works with methods that are more controversial in Quranic scholarship, although well-established in textual criticism, the text becomes, as can be seen in this case, easier to understand. In order to avoid the accusation that we have imposed an interpretation on the text or read it into it, it should be said here that Syro-Aramaic loanwords are omnipresent in the Qur'an; Aramaic was, after all, together with Greek, the cultural language of the Arabs in Late Antiquity (much like Latin during the European Middle Ages). And, the text is now better both grammatically and in terms of content. The central idea of this Surah is then perseverance in prayer together with patient trust in God, a motif that occurs frequently in the Qur'an, mostly and for which most often the Arabic verb *ṣabara* (nominal *ṣabr*) "patiently persevere, persevere, persist" is employed. Examples are:

2:45: *wa-stānū bi-ṣ-ṣabri wa-ṣ-ṣalāti wa- innahā la-kabīratun illā alā l-āṣīina* (And seek help through patience and prayer, and indeed, it is difficult except for the humbly submissive ).

2:153: *yā-ayyuhā llāina āmanū ṣ bi-ṣ-ṣabri wa- ṣ-ṣalāti inna llāha maa ṣ-ṣābirīna* (O you who have believed, seek help through patience and prayer. Indeed, Allah is with the patient).

3:200: *yā-ayyuhā llāina āmanū āmanū ṣbirū wa- ṣābirū wa-rābiṭū wa-ttaqū llāha laallakum tuflīhūna* (O you who have believed, persevere and endure and remain stationed and fear Allah that you may be successful).

And of course, this passage reading will make sense to those familiar with the Bible, e.g., "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings." (1 Peter 5, 8-9).

This interpretation of Surah 108 fits much better into the corpus of Quranic texts; or rather can be contextualised in a meaningful way, and is no longer an impenetrable oddity.

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*Featured image:* Surah Al-Kawthar, Naskh calligraphy, by Mirza Ahmad Neirizi, late Safavid era (18th century).

