

Tafseer Surah al-'Alaq (العلق)

Notes on Nouman Ali Khan's Concise Commentary of the Quran

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Introduction

- I. The opening verses of this surah were the first revelation that came down to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in the cave of Hira
 - A. There is a difference of opinion as to exactly how long the gap was between the initial few verses that were revealed in the cave and the rest of the surah
- II. There is a [long hadith](#) about how these first few verses came down
- III. The surah starts with emphasis on reading the Quran and ends with the ultimate goal of the slave, which is to get close to Allah. In other words, our relationship with the Quran takes us to the closeness of Allah

Tafseer of the Verses

1. Read in the name of your Master who created

- a. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) could not read or write and he was part of a nation whose general populace could also not read or write. They mainly relied on oral transmissions
 - i. This is why the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) responded to Jibrael that he could not read when he first brought him these verses
- b. "Read in the name of your Master" implies that from now on whatever he recites will be coming from his Master, which is Allah. Quran generally uses an authoritative tone because it is coming from Allah and He does not have to sugarcoat things for His slaves
- c. Why did Allah choose the word "Master (*Rabb*)" and not "Allah" to introduce Himself to the Prophet (pbuh) the first time?
 - i. Because the Arabs were already familiar with the word Allah as the Creator of everything and acknowledged it, but they had a problem with the issue of accepting Him as a Master
 1. So they separated between the Creator and the Master. They had set up other demigods as masters. In this first verse, Allah combined both and said that there is only one Creator and He is the Master as well
 - ii. The word *Rabb* in Arabic contains the following meanings:
 1. The one who gives gifts even though he does not have to
 2. The caretaker
 - a. Someone who takes care of something
 - b. So it is a form of comfort for the Prophet (pbuh) that he does not have to be afraid for what he has encountered
- d. It is interesting that the whole Arab world transformed by the coming of Islam, and the Arabs became the most powerful and influential people on Earth and it was all because of Islam, and that Islam started with the word "Read!"
 - i. The essence of it all and the word that started it all was this one word "Read!"

- e. The angel Jibraeel would inspire the Prophet (pbuh) with Allah's words, which would make an imprint on his heart, thus, he was able to repeat them afterwards
- f. Allah left the word "created" kind of open to mean all creation but in the next verse he defines it more specifically of what He is speaking about

2. Created man from a clinging substance

- a. Here Allah brought the focus of creation to the human being himself
 - i. Meaning He is asking the Prophet (pbuh) to focus and ponder over his own creation as a human being
- b. The Arabic word *'alaq* (clinging substance)
 - i. Means to hang on to something or for two things to be stuck to one another or related to one another
 - ii. It is also used to refer to pregnancy when the fetus hangs to the side of the uterus's wall
 - iii. In the context of pregnancy, it is also used to refer to a leech, because the baby sucks the nutrients of its mother like a leech

3. Read, and your Master is the most Noble

- a. The command to read comes again a second time
 - i. Some commentators tried to explain why it was used twice. The following opinions exist:
 - 1. The first one means to read for your own benefit the second one here is in reference to preaching it to others
 - 2. The first is in reference to learning and the second is in reference to teaching
 - 3. The first is in reference to within the prayer and the second is in reference to outside of it
 - 4. Some said it was only mentioned twice to emphasize reading the Quran due to its importance
 - a. We have to remember that the Quran came down as a conversation and not a book like the previous scriptures. This is why we see its structure and style more in line with speech than written form
- b. The Arabic word *akram* (most Noble)
 - i. It means in this verse that Allah is the highest Nobility there is and nothing is more Noble than Allah
 - ii. The word in Arabic also means a generous person
 - 1. Then in the context of this verse, it would mean that Allah will open the doors of generosity for you through His forgiveness. The more we read His book, the more generous He is with His forgiveness
 - iii. Some said the word here means that we should never lose hope in Allah because *akram* is someone that keeps on giving favors

4. Who taught by the pen

- a. Some said this is a continuation from the previous verse and describes the quality which makes Allah the most Noble
- b. Some said Allah is saying that throughout history, the civilizations that have produced knowledge through writing was only due to Him because it was Allah who taught man how to write
 - i. There are some things which are heavenly gifts that were given to mankind. These include:
 - 1. The urge to clothe ourselves
 - 2. Language
 - 3. Ability to write down our ideas and thoughts
- c. Some said it means the pen in the heavens that delivers the revelation of the Quran

5. Taught man that which he knew not

- a. Meaning the process of archiving our knowledge by writing it down and passing it on to the next generation would simply not exist if Allah had not taught man writing. It is the existing knowledge of the past that allows future generations to build on top of it
- b. If the meaning that the pen is in reference to the one in the heavens is taken, then this verse would mean that man would not have access to this Quran had Allah not taught man how to read and write

6. No! [But] indeed, man transgresses

- a. One of the reasons the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) started excluding himself to the cave of Hira before revelation was because he saw various types of crimes around his society. He secluded himself to get away from it
 - i. So it is as if Allah is acknowledging the Prophet's (pbuh) observation in this verse that mankind is indeed committing various types of crimes
 1. They transgress against others' rights

7. Because he sees himself self-sufficient

- a. Allah is answering here on why man transgresses. He does so because he thinks that he can get away with it
 - i. The words used are that man "sees himself" as self-efficient but in reality he is not
 1. It also tells us that if people were truly made self-sufficient, they would commit crimes. Generally, if people know that they can get away with doing wrong, they will do so

8. Indeed, to your Master is the return

- a. Meaning if mankind can internalize this idea that eventually they will die and return to their Master for judgement over their deeds, it would change their behavior. Crimes will continue until they fully and properly internalize this idea
 - i. Aisha said that in the beginning of Islam verses related to the afterlife and solidifying the people's belief in it came down so that the faith of people could be strengthened. Then the verses related to *halal* and *haram* came down because the people's faith was now strong enough to follow it

9. Have you seen the one who forbids

- a. This is in reference to Abu Jahl
 - i. Some say he had announced that if anyone sees Muhammad (pbuh) praying at the Ka'ba, then they should beat him or step on his neck. Once Abu Jahl tried to step on the Prophet (pbuh) while he was praying at the Ka'ba but he was divinely interrupted

10. A servant when he prays?

- a. The servant here is in reference to the Prophet Muhammad (puh) praying at the Ka'ba

11. Have you seen if he is upon guidance

- a. Meaning if Abu Jahl was guided, what would that be like
- b. Some said it means have you seen if Abu Jahl is upon guidance and foresight from Allah?
(*Al-Mukhtasar fi tafseer*)
 - i. Meaning he clearly is not

12. Or enjoins righteousness?

- a. Continuing the hypothetical from the previous verse, the verse is asking what would it be like if Abu Jahl actually enjoined righteousness
- b. Some said it means if Abu Jahl commanded the people with *taqwa* of Allah by obeying His commands and abstaining from His prohibitions, would such a person forbid the Prophet (pbuh) from praying?! (*Al-Mukhtasar fi tafseer*)

13. Have you seen if he denies and turns away

- a. The word *kadhaba* (denies) means a campaign against the truth, to call the Quran and the Messenger a lie, or to convince others that it is a lie
- b. The word *tawalla* (turns away) means to not care about something yourself and turn away from it
- c. Meaning have you seen Abu Jahl forbid what the Messenger (pbuh) came with and turn away from it? Does he not fear Allah?! (*Al-Mukhtasar fi tafseer*)

14. Does he not know that Allah sees?

- a. This is a rhetorical question
- b. Meaning does Abu Jahl not know that Allah is watching everything he is doing and that nothing is hidden from Him? (*Al-Mukhtasar fi tafseer*)

15. No! If he does not desist, We will surely drag him by the forehead

- a. Meaning if he does not stop his actions against the Prophet (pbuh), then he will be forcefully dragged by his forehead to the fire of Hell

16. A lying, sinning forehead

- a. Meaning that forehead of his is a liar and makes serious mistakes and this is why this very forehead of his will be dragged to the fire of Hell
 - i. Indirectly we are being told to use our minds for good and this is why this surah starts with "Read!", if not, then it might as well be dragged to the fire of Hell

17. Then let him call his associates

- a. This is an open challenge to Abu Jahl by Allah to call whomever he wants from among his supporters to stop the Prophet (pbuh). The next verse says Muhammad (pbuh) will be protected by the angels
- b. Some said this will take place on the Day of Judgement when he is cast into the Hellfire and he will be asked to call his associates for help, but of course he will be unable to do so (*Al-Mukhtasar fi tafseer*)

18. We will call the angels of Hell

- a. It is a defensive force that is able to not just defend and protect but also kill
 - i. They are also very aggressive
- b. Allah is saying that let Abu Jahl call his army to hurt the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and He will call His army, which are these defensive force of angels
- c. Some said it is in reference to the aggressive angels that are the custodians of Hellfire that will drag Abu Jahl on the Day of Judgement from his forehead to the Hellfire (*Al-Mukhtasar fi tafseer*)

19. No! Do not obey him. But prostrate and draw near [to Allah]

- a. The Prophet (pbuh) is being told to not pay any attention to Abu Jahl or his threats and go forward with praying at the Ka'ba and getting close to Allah
 - i. It indirectly shows that when we make prostration to Allah, we get close to Allah. It is the closest we are to Allah because it is the most humblest position we can reach. Physically we are lowest but spiritually the highest