An Exegetical Reading of Surah 103, Al-Asr
(By the Flight of Time or By the Declining Day, The Epoch)

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Exegetical reading of Surah 103, Al-Asr - (By the Flight of Time or By the Declining Day,
The Epoch) ¹

1. By the late afternoon (asr),
2. Truly humankind is in loss (khusr)
3. Except for those who have faith (iman) amal-al-salihat

And urge, enjoin, (tawasaw) each other to the truth (haqq) and
urge, enjoin (tawasaw) each other to steadfastness, fortitude (sabr).

Introduction

The earliest revelations of the Qur’an embody the first warnings and advices revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through the Angel Jibril (Gabriel). According to the traditional Muslim view, revelation begun around 610 CE (Schimmel, 1985, p. 12). These early surahs are in general short and in poetic phrasing and imagery. (Sells, 2005, p. 20). Surat-Al-Asr was one of these early surahs revealed to the Prophet in Mecca. It is the 103rd of the Qur’an’s 114 surahs and is the second shortest surah in the Qur’an after Al-Kauthar (Ali, 1961, p. 41).

The context of its revelation

¹Surah Al-Asr. Translated by Abdalhaqq & Aisha Bewley, The Noble Qur’an – A NewRendering of its meaning in English
The Arabian society of the seventh century was a tribal one. The Arab identity was inseparable from his/her clan and tribe. The measure of one’s character and social worth was directly related to the nobility of one’s tribe. The Meccan aristocracy was concerned about the call to faith in the one God and the individual accountability for one’s actions that Muhammad was preaching. These rich and powerful merchants were zealously devoted to their ancestors and the hierarchy of their society, which had placed them in a privileged position at the top. The radical egalitarianism of the message of Muhammad, who preached that the only distinction in the sight of God was based on a person’s piety, not on their lineage (Safi, 2009, p.47). This was challenging not only to their polytheistic outlook, but also to the very fabric of their society. To harmed Muhammad would have been too risky as he came from the aristocratic tribe of the Quraysh. Subsequently, the Meccan powers responded by indentifying and persecuting those followers of Muhammad who were slaves and outcasts or who came from undistinguished tribes that would not dare support them (Safi, 2009, p.47).

It was within this setting that Surah Al-Asr was revealed and when a nascent Islam was establishing an ethical monotheism in the pagan and tribal milieu. In this essay I explore how this surah persuaded the tribal Arabs to abandon paganism and embrace an ethical monotheism. Firstly, I will discuss the occasion of its revelation and make a summary of its contents. Secondly, I will attempt to analyse its admonitions to the new Muslim community and humankind. Thirdly, I will explain how it proceeded to employ faith with interdisciplinary approaches of ethico-religious principles/conditions to strengthen, the foundation of early and contemporary Muslims. Finally, its key terms will be explored to understand the meaning of the surah.

The occasion of its revelation (asbab-ul-nuzul) and its inimitability (i’jaz)

A contemporary scholar of the Qur’an, Muhammad Karam Shah, (d. 1998), states that the occasion of revelation (asbab-ul-nuzul) of Surat-Al-Asr occurred when AbuBakr as-Siddiq’s former teacher Kalah bin Asid disapproved of his embracing Islam. Kalah told AbuBakr that he never expected that a wise man like AbuBakr would make such a foolish decision, which would bring him nothing but loss. AbuBakr recognized that a person who accepts the truth and resolutely adheres to it would make the most profitable deal, and not a bad bargain (Shah, 2004, p. 924).

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2 The first Caliph of Islam
Umar bin Kathir Al-Qurashi Al-Busrawi, (d. 1373) a traditional exegete cites this surah as proof of the inimitability (i‘jaz) of the Qur‘an. He mentions that Companion Amr ibn al-As (d. 664) prior to accepting Islam, visited Musailamah Al-Kazzab (d. 634) who also claimed to be a Prophet. Musailamah asked Amr for examples of revelations to Muhammad. Amr ibn al-As was aware of the recent revelation of Surah Al-Asr to the Prophet Muhammad and recited it to him. Musailamah mentioned to Amr that a surah had also been revealed to him about a hyrax. Musailamah produced his surah only as a challenge to the Qur‘an. Amr ibn al-As, versed in the Arabic language was unimpressed and rejected it as absurd. (Ibn Kathir, 2010).

These stories demonstrate that many of the Arabs were willing to challenge the pagan tribal weltanschauung, or world view. The greatest determination for an Arab was how he feels for his fellow tribesman, which is called asabiyah (Isutzu, 2007, p. 56). Asabiyah was more influential than the dogma of the pagan religion. By the time of the revelation of the Qur‘an, this solidarity was showing signs of degeneration due to the nomadic and sedentary social organisations of the Arabs (Bamyeh, 1999, p. 17). The nomadic socio-economy was largely excluded from the trade based sedentarism. (Bamyeh, 1999, p. 59). This social organisation was showing disparity and the nomads were clearly disadvantaged (Bamyeh, 1999, p59).

In this context, people as Amr and others were demonstrating their opposition to the Arab leadership by getting into polemical discussions and arguments because of the influence that the revelation of the Qur‘an was having upon them. Toshihiko Isutzu (d. 1996) a scholar of the Qur‘an maintains that Islam was presenting an alternative approach to the moral ideals of the Jahilliyyah ways of the Arabs. (Isutzu, 2007, p. 74). A basic antagonism developed between the new faith and the old one. In any case, the Qur‘anic guidance was showing a more civilised form to the old pagan values in the midst of the growing community of the Muslims. (Isutzu, 2007, p. 75).

The early revelations of the Qur‘an drew the believer into a world of elemental transformations (Sells, 2007, p. 27) and simultaneously shaping the spirit of the new community. The message of Islam was taking affect not by discarding all that had come before but rather by modifying and reorganising what came before. The pagan society was not bereft of moral and ethical values but was practised in a tribal context. (Safi,
Early surahs as these attempted to crystallise the social-political unity based on a common faith rather than the tribal bloodline (Isutzu 2007, p. 58). The fundamental and the paramount source of the creed, rituals, ethics, and laws of the Islamic faith was being established through revelation (Aleem, 2005, p. ix).

The organisation of the surah

This surah is composed of three verses (ayahs) and sixteen words. It takes its name from the word al-asr occurring in the first verse. The second verse is of central importance. This verse expresses the tragic state of humankind; one of loss and deprivation. The third verse of the surah presents an exception from the general human condition of loss. This surah consists of two parts; its first part cautions that, with the passing of time humankind is at a loss and destined to ruin. The second part stresses the obligations and duties and tersely summarises the requirement of a successful life. (Ahmed, 2003, p. 4).

The rhyme and sounds of the surah

Michael Sells, a contemporary exegete of the Qur'an, mentions that the, “First revelations to Muhammad expressed vital existential themes in a language of great lyricism and beauty.” He says, “As the students learn these surahs, they are not simply learning something by rote, but rather interiorising the inner rhythms, sound patterns and textual dynamics-taking it to heart in the deepest manner (Sells, 2005, p. 11). He further explains that the rhyme and sounds of the surah can draw the reader or hearer into a world of elementary transformations (Sells, 2005, p. 27). Words such as asr, khusr, and sabr describe the poetic characteristic of the surah and make present the message they convey. Each verse in this surah ends with a double consonant ending in r. The words amanu and amilu are verbs that show some of the active participles of the surah. It is this vigour that accounts for such reactions that describes the effects of the surah. Sells expresses that, “The proclamatory aspect of the early Meccan passages, the strange vocabulary, the semantic gaps and the cosmic perspective establish a distance between text and audience”. However, he further says that, “within the elusive discourse of sound figures that distance is both enhanced and overcome”. (2005, p.28).
Traditionally, the Arabic grammarians consider the Qur'an to be a genre unique unto itself, neither poetry (defined as speech with metre and rhyme) nor prose (defined as normal speech or rhymed but non-metrical speech) (Qur'an Encyclopaedia, 2010). The Qur'an often, although by no means always, uses loose rhyme between successive verses as we have observed in *Surah Al-Asr* (Qur'an Encyclopaedia, 2010). The Qur'an highlights a wide rainbow of textual and rhetorical features, which are a unique use of the language (Muslimwiki, 2010). In the study of the rhetorical components of the *surah*, it is important to recognise the delicate balance between the use of small linguistic elements, like conjunctions, their rhetorical functions, as well as their semantic impact on the overall meaning of the Qur'anic structure (Muslimwiki, 2010).

Qur'anic oaths are another vehicle for sound figures (Sells, 2005, p. 217). In this *surah*, God swears by time (*asr*), which evokes the experience of loss (*khusr*). Through an intricate webbing of echoes and resonance across the sound, meaning and emotions, the bearing of good news is also suggested. The word perseverance (*sabr*) is such a moving figure, which reminds but not confines to particular words, often stretching across verbal boundaries (Sells, 2005, p. 220). Sells explains that the words, “Can be heard through the resonance, echoes, undertones and interstices of the Arabic text in recitation and in such sound vision resides the distinctive Qur'anic combination of awe and intimacy.” (2005, p. 220).

Sells posits that the “themes, stories, hymns and laws of the Qur’an are woven through the life stages of the individual, the key moments of the community, and the sensual world of the town and village.” (2005, p. 12).

**Views of traditional and modern exegetes.**

Traditional scholars and modern exegetes were encouraged by this *surah* because it was an initial attempt to provide a caution to time and a support program for believers from the challenges of the pagan social organisation. Ibn Kathir a traditional exegete holds that this *surah*, as a warning to believers not to waste time or they we could be humiliated or even ruined. (Ibn Kathir, 2010). Thomas B. Irving, a contemporary exegete, says that the *surah* offers a consoling prayer, since it brings home to believers
how all things change, and to strengthen one to learn patiently to face the inevitable. (Irving, 1985, p. 389). Both these exegetes offer a terse reminder of the importance of time and care in its utilisation.

Imam Shafi’i (d. 820), a jurist and traditional scholar of Islam, held that if God had only revealed this surah it would have been sufficient for the guidance of all humankind. (Ibn Kathir, 2010). It summarised the very essence of the Qur’anic message. Thus, Imam Shafi’i asserts that if one followed its counsel, it was enough for humankind to achieve success in life.

Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), a modern exegete of the Qur’an, asserts that this surah outlines a complete system for human life based on an Islamic viewpoint. He says that it defines, in the clearest and most concise form, the basic concept of faith in the context of its comprehensive reality (1979, p. 274). He further says that he is gravely shocked to see the loss and ruin in which humanity finds itself. He is critical of Muslims and non-Muslims and particularly witnessing that humankind is turning away from the goodness that God has bestowed upon it. He is confident that the guidance of this surah is what made the early Muslim great as it can do for those that follow it in the long history of humanity. He says that once the early Arabs were aroused by such surahs, they quickly burst the bounds of Arabia and zealously worked toward the salvation of humanity (Qutb, 1979, p. 280).

From these renowned exegetes of the Qur’an and their handling of this vital surah, we may take such honest stock as space allows and take their analyses even further. Can the modern reader within Islam or outside it hope to know the Qur’an in its essential reality in a truly religious reading? We are ready to judge by literary criteria and with evident reverence and discipline, but yet with a liberty of mind that reads for itself (Cragg, 1973, p. 74).

I will now explore the meaning and guidance of this surah by considering the following key terms. I will interweave these terms within the context of my discussion of this surah.

asr – time
insan - humankind
**Analyses of Surah Al-Asr**

1. **By the late afternoon (asr),**
2. **truly humankind is in loss (khusr)**

This *surah* opens to an admonition to humankind by God. God takes an oath by “time” and declares that humankind is in a state of loss (*khusr*) if it does not secure four conditions/principles of this oath: First, to have faith (*iman* *amal-al-salihat*); third, to encourage the truth (*watawasaw-bil-haqq*) and finally, to urge each other to have fortitude/steadfastness/patience (*watawasaw-bis-sabr*).

In the first verse the oath is a warning to the new Muslim community to be vigilant to the pitfalls of the temporal world. It is simultaneously consoling by providing solutions for the foundational development and integrity of the new faith. Each word of the revelation speaks from a specific point of view, which attempts to analyse the semantic structure of the value of the word (Isutzu, 2007, p. 3/4). These early revelation was a guide to develop the new faith and strengthen the early Muslims.

In the first two verses of the *surah* an emphasis is placed on three words *asr, insan* and *khusr*. I will first attempt to analyse the two key words, *asr and khusr*. I will interweave the word *insan* with *asr* and *khusr* to discover their meaning and message.

The Qur’an mentions two levels of time. One is from the title of Surah 76 called *Al-Dahar* and the other is *asr*. Abdullah Yusuf Ali (d. 1953), a modern exegete of the Qur’an, explains that the word *dahr* is time as a whole, unlimited or for a long period. The title of this *surah* recalls a pagan Arab idea that understood time as existing
spontaneously from eternity to eternity and responsible for the misery or happiness of creation. They believed that nothing but time could destroy them. They blamed it for their hardships in life and destruction. This attitude was misguided as time is a created thing and it has its mysteries but it is no more eternal then matter (Ali, 1983, p. 1654).

In addition, the pagan Arabs rejected the notion of a Hereafter (Safi, 2009, p. 70). They held that it was the personified view of time that catches up with them at the end of their lives. The Qur'an also says this in Q 45:24:- the pagan Arabs believed that there was nothing but the present life and that only time could that destroy them after death. Consequently, if there is no Hereafter and no cosmic accountability for one’s deeds is what prevents society from collapsing into full-blown chaos? (Safi, 2009, p. 70).

The word *asr* indicates a specific time that is measurable or the current time for a particular epoch, while the word *dahr* implies the general sense of time. (Asad, 1980, p. 974). *Surat-Al-Asr* bears a connotation of the passing time or the flight of time, which can never be recaptured (Asad, 1980, p. 974). From the two words, that defines time, it is the aspect of the caution of *asr* that is relevant for the guidance of humankind. Irving’s translation of *asr* as ‘epoch’ (1985, p. 389) illustrates the imagery that within a lifetime, nations or individuals can be at a loss. The *surah* does not show *asr* as an impersonal notion of time but rather as a caution to appreciate and live according to the plan of God in each era that will ensure that people will not be at a loss.

It is necessary to realise that our lives are mostly spent in time – a chronological sequence of minutes, hours, days and years. We live by time and are a result of time. Our minds are the products of the past and the present is merely the passage of the past to the future. One cannot reject chronological time; it would be absurd - one would miss life. Therefore, humankind has a relationship with time. To explore the importance of time for humankind I shall now briefly mention the views of some exegetes and others to give us an understanding to appreciate its meaning and its purpose.

The Shafi-Ash’arite theologian, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209) stated that he understood the meaning of *Surat-al-Asr* from an ice seller who was appealing to people in the bazaar to pity him and buy his ice before it melted away (Al-Razi, 2010). The analogy of melting ice to time instantly gives a feeling of life withering away and the urgency to do something to stop the loss. The *surah* effectively appeals to believers to learn about the
consequence of time before the age limit that humankind is allotted with, which will pass away as the melting of ice.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali a modern exegete of the Qur’an says that if we merely run a race against time, we will lose. He reiterates that by acting on our religious and spiritual responsibilities we may “conquer” time. The word “race” is the key to understanding Yusuf Ali’s concern on how people spend their time. He further explains that time is relevant to how an individual utilises it for one’s own growth and potential. Ali who also translated the Qur’an in English, invokes Shakespeare in his exegeses of the surah. In Sonnet 5, and 2, Shakespeare expresses the tyranny of “never resting Time” and “nothing against time’s scythe can make a defence”. Sonnet 64 further says, “When I have seen by Time’s fell hand defaced the rich proud cost of outworn buried age”. (1983, p. 1783). In his poetry, Shakespeare warns humankind that time stops for no one and he further cautions that it can be destroyed by its accesses and wasting of time by arrogance and greed. By drawing up on Shakespeare, Ali shows that these feelings about time transcends time and geography, and that Surah Al-Asr speaks about these universal human emotions. Whilst, Surat-Al-Asr provides a general warning and caution of time, Shakespeare shakes up the very socio-economic and political irresponsibility of people during an epoch. However, Surah Al-Asr, unlike Shakespeare provides particular conditions that will assist humankind to succeed in life.

Imam Shafi’i states that time is like a sword and if you do not cut it, it will cut you (2010). He explains time as a metaphor, which must be attacked aggressively in the hope that humankind will not be brutalised or damaged. Shakespeare uses the word “scythe” that is a weapon carried by time that represents death for humankind if they do not utilise it affectively. An emphasis is to understand time and become aware of its laws so that humankind will not bring itself to a loss. “Time” is on the move and if believers are complacent or deny the harmony of nature than they will inevitably brings themselves to a loss.

An interesting comment of Amr ibn al-As ³(d. 664) advises that humans should live in the world as if they will live forever and to live for the Hereafter (akhira) as if we will die tomorrow. (2010). People do not live forever and how does a believer live for the Hereafter in remembering death? People have to be vibrant and creative whilst they are

³A companion of the Prophet Muhammad
living, which is relative to time. Muslims are believers of the Hereafter and the advice of Amr, to work towards it with an energy that is lively and in preparedness for this life and the Hereafter. He is advising to be watchful and energetic in worldly and spiritual aspects of life so that one will not be at a loss in this world as well as in the Hereafter.

Kenneth Cragg a contemporary scholar of the Qur’an posited an exciting point that the time element may be taken to mean, either the entire Prophetic span of the Qur’anic incidence or the particular moments of separate revelations in it. This comment makes it clear that the guidance of the revelation of the Qur’an is a sustained reverence to reach anyone in a particular era to heed its cautions or advice for a solution (Cragg, 1973 p. 54).

In essence, this surah asks the reader to contemplate the wisdom and the purpose of time and to act accordingly. The several theories presented on the concept of time is meant as an undisclosed enigma or simply the affirmation of God’s decree as happens in all kinds of spheres, moral and social and the intent to caution and guide humankind. (Cragg, 1973, p .60) Its caution to use time responsibly is so strong that its connotation is such that Humankind can be destroyed by misunderstanding its true relevance. The reader should keep in mind that the surah is unfolding itself, word by word as a package and the warning of time is the first caution for humankind.

This surah contextualises time with humankind. The second key word, insane, is from uns, i.e. to be familiar with other humans (Hans Wehr, 1960, p. 30). Social responsibility means humankind has to develop its ability to think, to talk, communicate, contemplate and to act to educate, enhance and develop each other for their well-being. The Qur’an affirms that humankind is in a state of forgetfulness, confusion and in need of reminder (Sells, 2007, p. 117). The Qur’an shapes the guidance of humankind towards the Creator.

(Q 14:52) It is interesting that this surah relates its cautions and advice to humankind and not specifically for Muslims. It is a reminder to know God because from this core belief will develop the potential of humankind (Murad, 2010). Fadhlalla Haeri a contemporary Sufi scholar of the Qur’an mentions that we are social beings; we require laws that will ensure order. He opines that it is essential that we know the “nature of the self” that will result in creating an inner and outer harmony for the individual so that
he/she can deal with the world. The surah encourages humankind to work with each other to build a socio-economic and just society based on the faith of one God (1989, p. 84).

The third key word that is mentioned in the second verse is khusr. Sayyed Abul A’ala Maududi (d. 1979) a contemporary exegete explains that it lexically is an antonym of nafa’ (profit); in trade this word is used when loss results from a business deal or when the business is running in loss. He says that the Qur’an has made this word a special term of its own and uses it as an antonym of falah (success) in Q 31:4, and Q 39:34. Its concept of falah is not merely synonymous with worldly prosperity, but also refers to humankind’s true success in the world and in the Hereafter (2010). When people lose financially, they are immediately traumatised by this experience. They quickly learn to be responsible in the management of their business to avoid the consequence of a loss. Maududi uses these negative examples as a means through which one can understand the word khusr. The Qur’an refers to this word khusr as an opposite to success. Therefore, Surat-Al-Asr emphasises khusr, especially when humankind does not utilise time affectively or responsibly in any situation.

The following quotes of two famous Muslims show how the word khusr affects people in everyday life. Malik-al-Shabbaz, (d. 1965), an African American activist, asserts that the development of education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today (Malcom X, 2010). Another famous American, Muhammad Ali (b. 1942), a sportsman placed an emphasis on development when he said, “If I say today at forty what I said when I was twenty, then I have wasted twenty years of my life.” These examples indicate the importance of living in the present, and of understanding the ethos of the era in which we live. We should know better, what people mean when they say, “Times waits for no person” or to “manage your time”. Individual irresponsibility to time is destructive and a collective recklessness can destroy societies and bring humankind to a loss (khusr).

The first part of the surah is a serious caution for early Muslims to understand their responsibilities in the temporal world and the Hereafter. They were being guided and strengthened in preparation against greater challenges that they would face in the future.
The second part of the *surah* is organised to show its advice to the caution of the first part. Michael Sells informs us that the Qur’an affirms that humankind is in a state of forgetfulness, confusion, and in loss and in need of reminder. He says that this *surah* particularly warns that each human is at a loss, except those who engage in the four activities. (2005, p. 117). The four activities or conditions that will be discussed now are faith (*iman*) *amal-al-salihat*, enjoining (*tawasaw*) truth (*haqq*) and enjoining patience (*sabr*). The word *tawasaw* *amal-al-salihat* and *haqq*.

**Faith (*iman*) and Humankind (*insan*)**

3. **Except for those who have faith (**iman**) amal-al-salihat**

And urge, enjoin, (*tawasaw*) each other to the truth (*haqq*) and urge, enjoin (*tawasaw*) each other to steadfastness, fortitude (*sabr*).

The third verse presents a solution for humankind not to be in a loss. This *surah* stresses to the believers that from the condition of faith and the practise of the three further conditions/principles mentioned that they can succeed in a hostile environment, which they find themselves. Those who have belief must strive to comprehensively understand to have faith in the law of God, whether it can be on the physical or moral plane. They must have implicit belief in both the existence of God and in the all-permeability of a Divine Law (Ali, 1963, p.42).

The first condition mentioned in the third verse is faith (*iman*). For the early Muslims, faith was a first condition and it was this implicit belief that helped them to keep on to the onward path of righteousness and prevent them from straying inevitably into paths, which make labours vain (Ali, 1963, p. 42). The various influences of the pagan milieu were deep-rooted in polytheism (Safi, 2009, p. 70) and therefore those people that required help in their new faith were pointed to this *surah*.

H. Amir Ali (d. 1987) a modern exegete, explains that “The Muslims tend to limit the meaning *iman* to themselves”. He further states, “Again, however, it has to be pointed out, and here lies the value of a chronological analysis, that this *surah* was announced
at a time when there was practically none, or at least very few in the faith” (Ali, 1963, p. 42).

Sayyid Qutb argues that faith for believers is a characteristic by which the minute, transient human being attains closeness to God who is the Originator of the Universe and all that exist in it. He further says that God establishes a link with the whole world, which springs from that One Origin, with the laws governing it and the powers and the potentialities created in it (Qutb, 1979, p. 274). It was this understanding of faith that was a pivot for the believers life. Qutb further mentions that the human beings closeness to God granted him/her a certain strength, limitless scope and freedom. It endowed him/her with great enjoyment of life, its beauty and lives with companions in mutual friendship. He posits that from this everlasting happiness, delightful joy and true intimate understanding of life and creation are derived. This is the invaluable gain that the surah advises, to the lack which is the immeasurable loss (Qutb, 1979, p. 274).

Toshihiko Isutzu, (d. 1993) a contemporary scholar of the Qur'an, mentions that, “Muhammad made a daring attempt to abolish the principle of tribal solidarity and to replace it by the monotheistic faith, which would make possible a new organisation of society with a wholly ritualised way of life as a manifestation of the eternal order here on earth”. He further says, “It is clear that this revolution was prompted at first by a purely religious motive, though as time went on the principle of kinship by faith began to assume more and more a rich political colouring.” He further explained that Islam ordained a new type of brotherhood based on faith between all members of the community and that henceforth this brotherhood was to be regarded as closer and stronger than the bond of kinship by blood (Isutzu, 2002, p. 59).

Iman is from the root letters a-m-n that suggest ‘being secure’, ‘free from fear’, ‘trusting in’, ‘turning to’, from which follows its meanings of ‘good faith’, ‘sincerity’, and ‘loyalty’. The fourth form (amana) has a double meaning “to belief’ or to give one’s faith’ (Esack, 1999, p. 117) and is often used to refer to the strength of conviction of a Muslim. This meaning of faith (iman) in Islam, requires ‘a trust in God’, ‘constancy in prayer’, ‘giving charity’, ‘belief in the unseen” and such a person is called a mu'min (Q 8:2-4).

Farid Esack, a contemporary scholar of the Qur'an, cites that “There are many definitions of iman in Islamic theology. Depending on their definitions, various
theologians have either rejected or accepted the idea of *iman* as dynamic and able to increase or decrease. *Iman* has variously been defined as one or more of the following: affirmation, verbal testimony, belief, or righteous conduct." (1997, p. 118)

The dynamism that underlines the idea *iman* of being able to increase or decrease is discussed in the Qur’an. It states in (49:14) that it is possible to have one [Islam] and not yet the other [Iman]: "Do not say 'we have accepted faith'; rather say 'we have accepted Islam,' for faith has not yet entered your hearts." *Iman* is seen by believers as a personal acknowledgement of, an active response to, the presence of God in life. The literal meaning of faith (*iman*) is to provide peace and tranquillity (Rahman, 1983, p. 171). Several exegetes mention two *hadiths* narrated by al-Bukhari and Muslim: “The least of *iman* will save one in the Hereafter” and “*iman* is of [various] kinds that have seventy branches”. The highest is the testimony that there is no deity except God and lowest is the removal of an obstacle on the road (Esack, 1997, p. 120).

*Iman* is one of the four tiers of the Islamic religion (*din*): *islam*, *iman*, *ihsan*, and the Last Day. After *islam* comes *iman* or "faith", which refers to “true commitment” to God. It constitutes the articles of faith which were outlined along with the five pillars of Islam in the famous *hadith* of the Prophet involving the angel Jibril. (An-Nawawi, Hadith 2, 2010).

Haeri, opines that with strong faith (*iman*), Muslim anxieties must recede to achieve inner peace and contentment. He explains that the state of inner peace and contentment is to understand the nature of the "self" (*nafs*). The word *nafs* possesses many meanings and it may be defined as soul, or self, psyche, mind, spirit, or life. *Nafs* is derived from the root *nafasa*, whose root meanings include 'to be precious, valuable, or relive' and 'to breathe, inhale and exhale'. (Hans Wehr, 1976, p. 985/986). Haeri further describes the *nafs* as the self or soul, which breathes dynamism into physicality and gives it life. The self has been further defined as a subtle, ethereal essence, which carries the power of life. Indeed, he/she succeeds who purifies his/her own self (Q 91:9). Sufi masters say that the self is an entity that requires perfection and purification. They indicate that the perfection of the self is related to time and faith (*iman*). (Haeri, 1989, p. 31, 33)
Ibn Ata’illah Iskandri (d. 1309), a Shafi jurist and Sufi, mentioned that there are four sources of faith (iman). Firstly, to reflect, to think about God and His creation (Q 3:190, 191); secondly, to know God through His Most Beautiful Names and Attributes (Q 7:180); thirdly, to be obedient (ta’aa) to the Creator, and finally to refrain from disobedience (ma’siyah) to Him (Haddad, 2006).

It is interesting that Iskandri mentioned reflection as a source of faith as Muhammad spent his vigils in the Cave of Hira, near the outskirts of Mecca. He reflected (tafakkur) (Q 3:190-191) and meditated (Q 38:29) upon his situation and was concerned about the social, economic, and political order of the Meccan society. His disillusionment of the tribal values and idolatry made him appreciate the wonderment of creation and the idea of monotheistic belief (Q 13:3 Q 16:10/11). Muslims believe that God found the Prophet in meditation and in reflection, guided him to be His messenger. Muslims contend that thinking is intertwined with faith and its application is from reasoning to the discipline of faith in one God. (Q 16:44) From Muhammad’s experience of reflection and contemplation, is the first circumstance that leads to faith (Q 10:24) (iman) (Sebaa and Shama, 2010).

According to the Qur’an, other basic components of faith (iman) are patience, fortitude (sabr) and gratitude (shukr). (Q 32:24). These stations assisted the early Muslims to establish resilience and good character. It encouraged patience in difficult times and gratefulness during good times. Dynamic teachings of such initial surahs established the Islamic message and developed the Prophet and his companions to become the best generation of Muslims (Q 9:100).

For early believers to establish the unity of the monotheistic faith was the beginning of a coherent and systematic process for the establishment of a community based on the egalitarian message of the Qur’an. Thus, for believers this surah is a basic checklist in a broadest sense to establish their faith (iman), before challenges from daily life issues could derail them from their beliefs. (Ibn Abbas, 2010).

**Righteous deeds (amal-al-salihat)**

For the development of a God conscious society the surah maintains that faith cannot stand-alone. It requires other
amal-al-salihat). In the early stages of the Muslim communities’ development, believers had to justify their existence by righteous endeavours towards each other. Life impels activity and if things are not to lead to frustration, a community has to work for each other. (Ali, 1963, p. 43) Righteousness to work and strengthen the new community was essential for its growth or survival. The people of the new faith had to work together and develop a self-supporting society. Within this community, a visible strength had to be seen, that it was making a difference to the old society of warlords and inequalities.

Maududi (d. 1979) argues that no act can be a good act unless it is based on faith (iman) and it is performed in obedience to the guidance given by God and His Messenger. (Q 18:111). In other words, mere faith without righteous deed cannot save humankind from loss (2010). It is evident that iman is intrinsically connected to righteous deeds whether they are part and parcel of it or a necessary consequence of it (Esack, 1997, p. 122).

Absar Ahmed, a distinguished philosopher cites, that “the qur’anic word amal too is very significant. The two locutions ‘actions and ‘activity’ are both generally taken to convey the sense of the Arabic word amal. He says that there is a subtle difference in their connotation. Any kind of movement or work can be called activity, but the word action usually implies some strenuous or arduous task and it, as such, better expresses the meaning amal. By combining the connotation of amal and salihat it is for humankind to put up a hard struggle to achieve that real goal for which humankind was potentially created, and has to ascend to certain heights to attain that goal. All th amal-al-salihat.” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 24).

Al-Baihaqi (d. 1066) a famous Shafi jurist and scholar of Hadith, expresses that the combination of these two terms develops a relationship with the Creator by worshipping Him and serving humankind. It establishes contentment through faith (iman) and shows a method to attain sincerity (ikhlas). (Q 4:136) (2010). There are about thirty-six times that the phrase faith (iman amal-al-salihat) appear in the Q Amal-al-salihat encourages virtuous behaviour towards the creation (Ahmed, 2010, p 24). Esack explains that “It is important to note that, whatever the differences of in the relationship between iman and righteous deeds, traditional scholarship has usually interpreted these in a very narrow sense, i.e., as the rituals of reified Islam”. He further says, “this not always the case and that there are numerous other examples
where the reference is to *iman* and righteous conduct in a general and specified sense*. This combination of faith (*iman* *amal-al-salihat*) “is the ability of the individual to respond to the voice of God as he or she perceives it and manifest it in an abiding life of service to those with whom God himself has chosen to identify, the oppressed and marginalised?” (Esack, 1997, p. 125).

The *surah* strongly advises early believers to have faith in God and doing righteous actions for their own sakes. This vigour was expected to lead to other ethical values to grow, which will develop individuals and societies. The *Jahilliyah* concept of time and its values were being challenged by the glowing faith expressing its own social and ethical concepts of Islam (Isutzu, 2007, p. 54). Perhaps the best elaboration of this relationship is offered by a contemporary scholar of Islam, Fazlur Rahman (d. 1966). He says that that the teachings of the Qur’an could be seen as “directed towards the creation of a meaningful and positive quality among human beings. He further mentions that the Islamic purpose cannot be realised until genuine freedom to human beings is restored and freedom from all forms of exploitation-social, spiritual, political and economic-assured.” (Taji-Farouki, 2006, p. 51).

We will now deal with the next two points, i.e., first, to urge, enjoin the truth (*watawasaw-bi-haqq*) and second, to urge, enjoin to persevere, to be patient, to have fortitude (*watawasaw-bis'-sabr*).

**Enjoining (tawasaw) the truth (bil haqq) (Continuation of the third verse)**

This brief *surah* is not content with faith (*iman* *amal-al-salihat*) to safeguard believers to be at a loss from the token of time. The third verse further compels conditions/principles to set examples of truth (*haqq*). It is important to keep in mind that Muhammad was bringing about a radical social and economic reform in Mecca and this was affecting the controlling tribe, the Quraysh, its wealth and power (Aslan, 2005, p. 44). Therefore, the believers’ faith in the one God was seen as a deliberate attack on the pagan religion and economic life of Mecca.

The *surah* advises believers to act collectively to strengthen their position. Israr Ahmed (d. 2010), a scholar in Islamic studies, states that the word (*tawasaw*) entails encouraging each other to establish a collective truth and a just social order for good leadership and
governance. He further states that in the last part of surat-Al-Asr, the word tawasaw has been used twice. He says that it's verbal noun is tawasi, and it is derived from wasiyyat, which means admonition, exhortation with persistent emphasis. (Hans Wehr, 1976, p. 1075). He states that this infinitive is formed from the stem of the verbal noun tafaul, whose first attribute is mutual cooperation and the second is emphasis to the point of exaggeration. He further mentions that this action of mutual exhortation is required with the greatest fervour and intensity. He explains that this stage necessitates the establishment of a collective community or ummah based on the principles of mutual exhortation of truth and patience (Ahmed, 2010).

The comprehensive phrase “enjoining to truth” (watawasaw-bil-Haqq) embraces within it, preaching virtues and holding back people from vices. It implies asking and inviting people to do righteous deeds and stopping them from falling in the snare of evil. It exhorts people to be merciful, to have compassion for each other, and to be kind to each other (Ahmed, 2003).

Haqq means both ‘truth’ and ‘reality’, and is derived from the word haqiqa. (Hans Wehr, 2010, p. 192). Haqq is used more than 200 times in the Qur’an. Al-Haqq is one of God’s Fairest Names and it is the truth of accepting and knowing the Creator. God is the essence of truth and all basic truth’s emanates from His reality and thus we can than understand the nature of all other truths. The Qur’an reminds the believers that the first haqq is God (Q 23:115/116). It is from this truth that the believers are determined and show strength against any opposition to untruth and injustice.

The Qur’an in (17:26) shows haqq as social justice system for the rights of humankind and especially the poor, to give them what is due to them. The Qur’an is particularly clear in (17:26), “Give your kin what is due to them, and the poor and the travellers alike, but do not squander your substance wastefully”. The juridical concept and terminology of human rights are grounded in the Qur’an with an explicit hint that balance is necessary in social behaviour (The Qur’an: An Encyclopaedia, 2010)

The opposite of truth (haqq) is falsehood and deception (batil). (Q 34:49). Falsehood confronts humankind throughout life. In order that people might not fall amidst the vast generality of those whose labours have been futile, they must hold on to truth and help established it. Truth (haqq) is weak when evil is strong. Edmund Burke (d. 1797) an
Anglo-Irish statesman says, “All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing”. (2010). Allowing this state of affairs establishes an atmosphere of evil, that promotes disbelieve, anxiety, confusion, erratic behaviour, and a collective mood of loss.

The revelation of this surah occurred during difficult times for the early Muslims. They had to contend with the oppression of the Meccan aristocracy and to find support for their new faith. Surat-Al-Asr educated early Muslims succinctly to enjoin virtues as haqq that strengthened them and gave them confidence to persevere against oppression and tribulations. A hadith of the Prophet reminds believers that when they see oppression they must first, eradicate it physically and thereafter with their tongue and last with their heart, i.e., to mentally reject it as bad, and that is the lowest form of our faith (iman). (An-Nawawi, hadith, 34). The highest witnessing of the truth (haqq) is speaking out in the face of a tyrant. (S. Iqbal, 2010) Very few can stand up to this type of truth (haqq). Therefore, to ensure a society that is just and peaceful the early believers had to stand up against the inequalities and disparities of the pagan milieu.

The Islamic worldview of truth for the early Muslims was to confirm the revelation of God and not to form wild conjectures about Him and His revelation (Isutzu, 2007, p 141). The Jahiliyah era was even more contrasted with truth as a mode of consciousness. It represented a state of anxiety in the heart in contrast to a state of tranquillity that came from faith in God (Safi, 2009, p. 67). This surah was showing the early believers a methodology on how faith in one God can unite them. It was this expectation in the unity of faith that would strengthen them by working together and enjoining truth with justice. This surah added other conditions/principles upon faith that facilitated the grooming of early Muslims to build an egalitarian society that would be difficult to challenge once it was established.

Enjoining patience (sabr) (Continuation of the third verse)

Finally, surat-Al-Asr advises believers to mutual encouragement (tawasaw) in patience (sabr). Working together in righteousness and truth from faith must be enjoined than by patience. The occurrence of sabr after haqq is pregnant with implication. When one commits to haqq, one actually undertakes a difficult task. Carrying out of one’s commitment to haqq would never be possible without sabr. The Prophet Muhammad
was most patient (Al Ghazali, 2010) and earlier Prophets as Ayub (Job); Ya’qub (Jacob) and others demonstrated beautiful examples of this state. (Q 2:45), (Q 2:153), (Q 2:155-157), (Q 11:115), (Q 2:177).

Sabr was a prominent virtue in desert conditions in the days of the Jahiliyyah (Isutzu, 2007, p. 102). In the desert where the conditions of living were harsh, every person was constantly required to show extraordinary patience and endurance for one’s mere existence and the subsistence of the tribe (Isutzu, 2007, p. 102). Physical strength was necessary and had to be backed up by patience that came from within. The inflexible determination to stand by one’s cause whatever might happen. This old nomadic virtue was transformed by Islam into one of its cardinal virtues by furnishing it with a definite religious direction: ‘to have patience in the way of God’.

Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855) a prominent jurist and a traditional scholar of Islam, said that patience is mentioned in the Qur’an in ninety places (2010). Other verses that orders patience are: Seek help in patience and prayer (Q 2:45) God loves the patient (Q 3:145); and Surely God is with the patient (Q 2:153). In the early days of Islam, patience was enjoined upon believers on the battlefield when fighting against the pagan Arabs (Isutzu, 2007, p. 102). Exercising patience for early Muslims to establish the new faith required resilience and fortitude in almost every aspect of their lives.

Al-Tustari (d. 896), a Sufi and scholar of the Qur’an, mentions that faith (iman) has two branches, one, which is to be thankful (shukr) to God and the other, to be patient (sabr). (2010). He further advises that believers must exercise patience, fortitude (sabr), specifically, in three circumstances. Firstly, during, tribulation/affliction (masâ‘ib), secondly, during obedience (ta‘aa) such as fasting, etc, and thirdly, during disobedience (ma‘siyah), abstaining from sin, when tempted by excess materialism and evil. (Al-Tustari, 2010).

Haeri in his ta‘wil (inner interpretation of the Qur’an) of surat-Al-Asr explain that patience (sabr) is like eating a bitter aloe. One does not like this condition, as it can be tough on the self. Haeri shows a technique on how not to be at a loss by the token of time. This requires being in the zone of non-time and non-space. He holds that to solve the paradox of time is to go beyond time. He says that the foundation of all of this is that God is As-Sabur. He is beyond time and patience is the shrinking of time. For example,
if we wanted to eat a fruit, which is not ripe, we know that we have to wait seven days before it is ready to be eaten, and so we agree to wait. What we have done is to freeze a week of time into “zero time”. (2007, p. 277). Patience is not an easy virtue to secure, since it requires support and assistance in various ways. A new social organisation based on the faith of God was being formed to deal with the religio-political oppression of the pagan tribal leadership. Thus, the early believers had to encourage and console each other from the difficult time that they were experiencing.

Abu'l-Faraj ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1350), a classical exegete of the Qur’an, has mentioned that patience is a tool and provision for the thankful. Thus patience comes to represent an essential aspect of faith, which it shows when it finds itself in unfavourable conditions. This was actually the case with Islam in the early years as it can be for any other period of time (2010).

The pagan Arabs and especially the Quraysh tried everything to silence Muhammad and his Companions from getting a stronghold of the Meccan religio-political system. In was in this context that sabr was shown as a virtue that was an unwavering characteristic for early Muslims steadfastness to survive in their new faith.

**Conclusion:**

For the pre-Islamic Arab this surah must have had a huge impact, through its image of caution against time and its exhortations for a vociferous participation in a collective struggle for righteousness and truth.

The surah is significant in that an entire practical code of conduct was binding upon the believer the moment he/she truly believed in the oneness of God and the truth of the Prophetic conduct (Isutzu, 2007, p. 106). It can be emphasised that the Qur’anic injunctions that were urgent in the original pagan setting of the first Muslims, led them to reach a true monotheism. Thus change happens pragmatically and revolutionises each epoch of the Qur’anic reception is a bold claim of the Qur’an (Cragg 1973, p. 189).

Interestingly, when humankind finds itself at a loss; it can revive itself by returning to the formula provided by the third verse and the four principles/conditions, which are adhered to as a foundation. We saw how these four principles operated on both
physical and spiritual levels. This is probably the reason why the companions of the Prophet did not want to become heedless of the foundational message of Islam. Consequently, they used to meet one another and only depart until one of them recited *sura* Al-Asr to the other and they bid peace upon one another. (Al-Tabarani, 2010).

People may say that all is “loss”, but the Qur’an says, “No, not all”. (Ali, 1961, p. 41). Muslims believe those that practise the four principles/conditions as mentioned in this *sura* will not be in vain.

In a succinct and terse language, this *sura* brings humankind face to face with the inexorable mystery of time. It humbles and empowers humankind with advice, graceful words of goodwill, on how to ride the waves of the perilous seas of time. It beckons to mutual support, truth, and steadfastness in patience through faith in God.

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