

*Allahu s-samad \**  
*lam yalid wa-lam yulad \**  
*wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwan ahad \**

[This surah is frequently recited as a credal statement, in addition to being a favorite for inclusion in daily prayer. It is reminiscent of what is called the *Shma`* in Jewish tradition, a particularly important prayer:

“Hear, O Israel! The Lord [Yahweh] is our God.  
The Lord [Yahweh] is One.”  
*shma` yisra`el*  
*adonai [yahweh] eloheinu*  
*adonai [yahweh] e`ad*

The key point of comparison is the emphasis on the term “One,” which occurs in a rhythmically final position in both texts. In the Arabic, it also provides the rhyme that continues throughout the *surah*. “One” is *ehad* in Hebrew. While it would normally be *wahid* in Arabic, *ahad* appears here unexpectedly [It exists in Arabic, but is only normally used in construct before a plural noun, e.g., *a`ad ar-rij •l* “one of the men.” It may be that the use of *a`ad* here is meant to match *e`ad* of the Hebrew prayer.

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#### ***Surat al-Falaq* (“Daybreak”) (Q 113)**

In the name of God, the Merciful and Beneficent

1. Say: I seek protection with the Lord of the Daybreak
2. From the evil of His Creation:
3. From the evil of the dark when it falls;
4. From the evil of women who blow on knots;
5. And from the evil of an envier when he envies.

[The mention of women blowing on knots (in string, twine, or thread, presumably) refers to a type of magic practiced in pre-Islamic Arabia involving uttering a curse of an enemy while tying a knot and then blowing on it. The goal of this practice was to cause the curse actually to befall the enemy mentioned, an Arabian form of voodoo, so to speak. Envy is also considered a dangerous and destructive force in Middle Eastern societies.]

#### ***Surat al-Nas* (“Mankind”) (Q 114)**

In the name of God, the Merciful and Beneficent

1. Say: I seek protection with the Lord of mankind,
2. The King of mankind,
3. The God of mankind,
4. From the evil of the slinking whisperer
5. Who whispers in the breasts of mankind,
6. Both genies and mankind.

[The slinking whisperer who appears in verse 4 is traditionally identified as the Devil. The genies (*jinn*) mentioned in verse 6 are described as a parallel species to man who

share many of their characteristics but are often invisible, weightless, and endowed with the power of flight. The Qur'an states that they have been created out of fire, while man has been created out of clay. They appear often in the Qur'an, but the idea that they grant three wishes comes from elsewhere—ultimately European folktales, in all likelihood. Even the Aladdin story in Arabic does not have three wishes. Genies may be both good or bad, but they are conceived of as being more bad than good, on the whole, or at least potentially quite dangerous. Often the meaning of genies is close to that of “demons” in English.]

**Exercise III. Complete the following:**

1. What are the similarities between these two surahs? Be specific, and pay attention to the structure.
2. What purpose or function are they meant to serve?
3. What does the initial “Say:” tell us?
4. What does the overall similarity of the two texts suggest?
5. How do the two surahs differ? Do these differences give them a different effect?

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***Ayat al-Kursi* (“The Verse of the Throne”) (Q 2:255)**

255. God—There is no god save Him, the Alive, the Eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. To Him belongs all that is in the Heavens and all that is on the Earth. Who is he who would intercede with Him except by His leave? He knows that which is in front of them and that which is behind them, while they encompass nothing of His knowledge save what he will. His Throne extends over the Heavens and the Earth, and sustaining them does not tire Him. He is the Sublime and Tremendous. \*

[This verse is often read to ward off evil, probably on the logic that it stresses God's power. *Surat Yasin*, the 36th surah of the Qur'an, is also read to ward off evil, as are *Surat al-Falaq* and *Surat al-Nas*. It appears frequently on jewelry, such as pendants, worn as a type of amulet, and is probably the single most frequent text for wall plaques, souvenir plates, and other decorative items for the home or office.]

**Exercise IV. Answer the following questions:**

1. If God has a throne, what does this tell us about Him?
  
2. How long is this one verse? Do you think it is from a Meccan surah or a Medinan surah?
  
3. The verse insists that God does not get tired. Does God ever get tired in the Bible? (Hint: Didn't He need to rest once?)
  
4. Comment on any aspect of the verse that you find interesting.

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***Ayat al-Nur* (“The Verse of Light”) (Q 24:35)**

35. God is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth. The likeness of His light is like a niche in which there is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as if it were a pearly star, kindled with oil from a blessed tree, an olive tree neither from the East nor the West, the oil of which nearly glows even when fire has not yet touched it. Light upon Light, God guides to His Light whom He will. God speaks to mankind in parables, and God is the Knower of all things.

[This verse appears especially on lamps hung in mosques, as well as on plaques and other decorative items in homes.]

**Exercise V. Answer the following questions:**

- 1.. Compare and contrast the Verse of Light with the Verse of the Throne.

2. The Verse of Light informs us that God speaks to mankind in parables (Ar. *mathal*, *amth•l*). The Arabic word *mathal* “proverb, parable, comparison” is related to the Hebrew and Aramaic words *mashal*, which have the same meaning, and parables play a substantial role in the Bible. (You may have heard of the parables of Jesus in the gospels.) A parable is a text which has two meanings, the surface or literal meaning, and a second meaning which is not specified literally but must be figured out. What is the two levels of meaning of the Verse of Light, in your opinion?

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**Exercise VI: This passage is the first half of Surah 89, The Dawn.  
Read it carefully and answer the following questions.**

Q 89 The Chapter of the Dawn

1. [Swear] By the dawn,
2. By the ten nights,
3. By the even and the odd,
4. And by the night when it passes.
5. Is there not in these an oath for one who understands?
6. Have you not seen what your Lord did with [the tribe of] `Ad,
7. with [the city of] Iram of the many pillars,
8. The like of which have not been created in all the land?
9. And with [the people of] Thamud, who hollowed out the boulders in the valley?
10. And with Pharaoh, ruler of the Pyramids?
11. All of them were tyrants in the lands

12. Multiplying corruption therein,
13. So your Lord poured upon them a scourge of punishment,
14. For your Lord is on constant guard.

...

#### Questions

1. Divide up this passage into logical sections.
2. In your opinion, what purpose do the oaths at the beginning of the passage serve?
3. What are the three examples given in the passage? With which are you familiar? Which have you not seen mentioned before?
4. What are the characteristics that bind these three examples together? What is the audience supposed to think about them?
5. What is role does the Lord play in this passage?

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**Bibliography:**

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*The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary.* Trans. Abdallah Yusuf Ali. Originally published in Lahore in 1938, but many editions since. This translation includes a number of informative appendices, many preaching commentaries and many selections of the translator's own devotional poetry. A number of editions are available with the Arabic text as well

*The Koran.* Trans. with notes by N.J. Dawood. 4th rev. ed. New York: Penguin, 1974, This is the best translation available in English to date, in my opinion. The translator avoids literal translation and endeavors to render the Arabic into functionally equivalent English. Unfortunately, his translation does not provide the verse numbers in the text, which makes close work with the text difficult.

*The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an: An Explanatory Translation.* Trans. Mohammad Marmaduke Pickthall. First published New York: A.A. Knopf, 1930, but many editions have been published since. Pickthall sticks very close to the Arabic text and standard Sunni doctrine regarding the meaning of the text. He also overdoes an attempt to sound like the King James Bible. Because of the first feature, as well as the provision of verse numbers in the text, I have found this suitable for use in the classroom.

*The Koran Interpreted.* Trans. Arthur Arberry. London, 1964. Reads well in English, but is perhaps too flowery on occasion. A number of Arberry's rhetorical flourishes do not reflect the original text accurately, in my opinion.

*The Qur'ān, Translated, with a Critical Re-Arrangement of the Surahs,* 2 vols. Trans. Richard Bell. Edinburgh : T. & T. Clark, 1937-39. This translation is interesting because it rearranges the surahs in what Bell reconstructs as the historical order of their appearance. In addition, it includes many notes and markings explaining how the individual surahs were constructed out of smaller historical fragments.

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[all translations are my own]