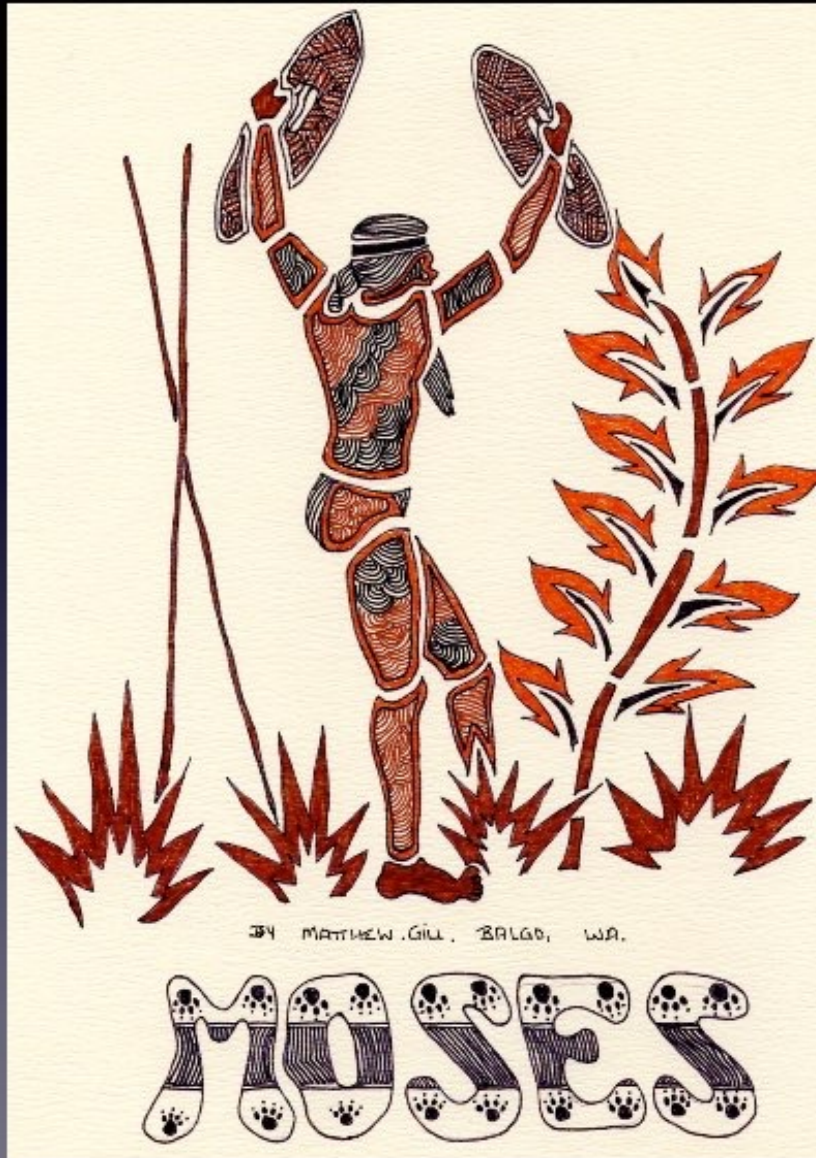


09. Sûrahs 17 - 27



Sûrah 17 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 17:1 'Glory be to Him Who carried his servant by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose precincts we have blessed that we might show him some of our signs. Truly He is the Hearer, the Seer'.

'Farthest' translates 'al aqsa', the name given to a small mosque built in the 7th century, after the death of Muhammad at the extremity of the Temple Mount. It was built on the site of a Christian church.

Muhammad is recording a vision he had of being taken into heaven. A tradition grew up that he visited Jerusalem riding a winged horse through the sky.

Sûrah 17:25 'If you are righteous, then truly He is Forgiving toward the penitent'.

God's readiness to forgive is central to the teaching of Jesus, as it was central to his ministry.

Jesus encouraged a paralysed man: 'Take heart, your sins are forgiven' (Matthew 9:3).

He instructed his disciples: 'Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses' (Mark 11:25).

Jesus shared his Spirit with his disciples so that they, too, could be instruments of God's forgiveness: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven' (John 20:22).

Paul picked up Jesus' teaching about God's forgiveness when he pleaded with the Christian community in Corinth to forgive a member who had behaved badly. He wants God's gracious forgiveness to flow through them: 'You should forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him' (2 Corinthians 2:7-8).

Christians do not limit God's forgiveness to 'the righteous'. This is central to Paul's experience. As he wrote to the Christian community in Rome: 'God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8).

Sûrah 17:26 *'Give to the kinsman his right, and to the indigent, and the traveller, but do not squander wastefully'*.

James is faithful to his Jewish heritage and to Jesus when he includes in his definition of religion 'to care for orphans and widows in their distress' (James 1:27).

He insists on action, not words: 'If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says: "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat your fill," without supplying their bodily needs, what is the good of that?' (James 2:15-16).

He categorises neglecting the poor and 'spending what you get on your pleasures' as equivalent to adultery, for it is to break our part in our covenant with God (see James 4:3-4). 'The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, wages that you have kept back by fraud, cry out to God' (James 5:4).

In his teaching on giving what we have to those in need, Jesus calls us to what this sūrah may consider under ‘squander wastefully’.

‘If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous’(Matthew 5:40-45).

Jesus’ image of God differs from that revealed in Sūrah 17:26. For Jesus God’s love is unconditional and extravagant. He calls his followers to emulate that love.

Sûrah 17:31 *'Slay not your children for fear of poverty. We shall provide for them and for you. Surely their slaying is great sin'.*

This statement gives us an insight into the tribal customs of the time. The Quran challenges the Muslim community to support the poor and to protect the lives of children born into poverty.

Sûrah 17:32 *'Do not come near adultery; truly it is indecency and an evil way'.*

Jesus speaks against adultery. He goes further, challenging his followers to be pure in heart: 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart' (Matthew 5:27-28).

Sûrah 17:35 'Give full measure when you measure, and weigh with a right balance.'

Similar injunctions recur throughout the Quran.

In the Christian Scriptures, the principle underlying this exhortation is expressed by James, who is critical of injustice perpetrated by the rich: 'Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter' (James 5:3-5).

Sûrah 17:78 'Perform the prayer at the declining of the sun until the darkening of the night. And the recitation at dawn – truly the recitation at dawn is ever witnessed'.

It seems to me that one of the strengths of Islam is its simplicity. There are certain things not to do, and there are certain things to do, notably, as in this text, to pray at certain times. Ritual prayer (Salât) is one of the five pillars of Islam.

Jesus encouraged his disciples 'to pray always and not to lose heart' (Luke 18:1).

Sûrah 17:81 *'Truth has come and falsehood has vanished. Truly falsehood is ever vanishing'*.

Tradition has it that Muhammad recited these words when he witnessed the destruction of the idols around the Ka'bah after the conquest of Mecca in 630AD.

Christians see Jesus as God's focal Word, revealing who God really is. Throughout John's Gospel it is this revelation that is meant by the word 'truth'.

'Grace and truth came through Jesus the Messiah' (John 1:17).

'You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free' (John 8:32).

Jesus is 'the Way, and the Truth, and the Life' (John 14:6). Jesus reveals God as Love (the Truth). He leads us to God (the Way), so that we can share his love-communion with God (the Life).

Surah 17:86 *'If We willed, We could take away that which We revealed unto thee'.*

This is yet another statement of God's freedom to reveal what God wants. God is not bound by what we might see as reasonable and logical. We studied this text and others like it in Part One.

Sûrah 18 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 18:47 *'Wealth and children are an ornament of the life of this world, but that which endures – righteous deeds – are better in reward with the Lord, and better hope'*

As we saw when reflecting on Sûrah 9:71, for Jesus, too, there are values that transcend family. In regard to 'righteous deeds', Matthew quotes Jesus as saying: 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled'(Matthew 5:6).

Sûrah 18:106 *'That is their recompense – Hell, for having disbelieved, and for mocking My signs and My messengers'*

In sûrah after sûrah the Quran declares that God has chosen Muhammad to warn of the punishment of Hell for those who do not accept God's revelations through him.

Sûrah 19 (from Mecca).

This Sûrah has nearly one third of all instances of calling God Ar-Rahmân (The Compassionate). It is also the only sûrah named after a woman, 'Mary' the mother of Jesus. Mary is the only woman in the Quran called by her name.

It speaks first of Zechariah and the miraculous birth of his son, John (verses 2-15). It goes on to speak of the virginal conception of Jesus by his mother, Mary (Miryam, verses 16-34). In verse 28 Mary is called 'sister of Aaron'.

Sûrah 19:35 *'It is not for God to take a child'.*

As we saw in Part One, Muhammad misunderstood the Christian belief that Jesus is the 'Son of God'.

The section goes on to describe how Abraham was banished by his father for failing to continue to worship the gods of his tradition by insisting on the truth that there is only one God (verses 41-48).

It then speaks of Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Aaron (verses 49-53); and then of Ishmael (verses 54-55); then Idris (identified with Noah; verse 56).

The rest of the section is a condemnation of unbelievers.

Sûrah 20 (from Mecca).

This sûrah tells the story of Moses at the burning bush, and his confrontation with the Pharaoh of Egypt, the escape of the Israelites, Moses' encounter with God on the mountain and the people's infidelity in worshipping the golden calf. This infidelity goes back to the infidelity of Adam in the Garden.

This sûrah asserts that God is now revealing everything to Muhammad for the salvation of the human race.

Sûrah 21 (from Mecca).

There were Jewish and Christian tribes in Arabia during Muhammad's life. He, however, was born into a pagan tribe, the Quraysh, who were polytheists. Muhammad's key mystical experience was his seeing that there is only one God. It is this conviction that is expressed in every section of the Quran, including here in Sûrah 21.

Sarah 21:108 *“Say, “It is only revealed unto me that your God is one God. So will you be submitters?”*

Sûrah 21:91 *‘As for she who preserved her chastity, we breathed into her Our Spirit, and made her and her son a sign for the worlds’.*

This is yet another example of the Quran's respect for Jesus and his mother, Mary. See the commentary on Sûrah 3:45 for Luke's account of God's breathing the Spirit into Mary.

Sûrah 21:92-93 'Truly this community of yours is one community, and I am your Lord. So worship Me! But they have fragmented their affair among themselves. Each is returning unto Us'.

Muhammad witnessed the fragmentation of the Jewish and Christian communities that were divided into sects and denominations. The Quran rejoices that there were Jews and Christians who were joining the 'one community' of Islam. Islam also suffers from divisions.

Jesus prayed: 'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me' (John 17:20-21).

Sûrah 22 (part from Mecca and part from Medina).

Sûrah 22:17 'As for those who believe, and those who are Jews, the Sabeans, the Christians, the Magians, and the idolaters, indeed God will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection. Truly God is witness over all things'.

As regularly in the Quran, Christians are included among those who do not believe.

Sûrah 22:19-20 'Garment of fire will be cut for them, and boiling liquid shall be poured over their heads, by which their innards and their skin will be melted'.

In presentation 6 we compared the Muslim and Christian views of hell.

Sûrah 22:27 'Proclaim the Hajj among mankind. They shall come to thee on foot and on all manners of lean beast, coming from all deep and distant mountain highways'.

As noted earlier, the pilgrimage to Mecca (the Hajj) is one of the five pillars of Islam.

Sûrah 22:78 'Strive [jihad] for God as He should be striven for. He has chosen [for] you – and has placed no hardship for you in the religion – the creed of your father, Abraham He named you muslims aforetime, and herein, that the Messenger may be a witness for you, and that you may be witnesses for mankind. So perform the prayer and give the alms, and hold fast to God. He is your Master, and how excellent a Master, and how excellent a Helper'.

In Presentation 5 we looked at the use of the word ‘jihad’ (striving) in the Quran. It speaks of the commitment needed to live the way revealed by God. Unfortunately living the way of God includes the use of violence to defend and propagate Islam.

Here Muhammad is speaking of submission to God’s will, striving to do what God commands and striving against what God has forbidden.

For Muhammad, Abraham was the first Muslim, the first to submit to the will of the One God. All who share Abraham’s faith are true Muslims. Muhammad sees this especially in Moses and Jesus and those who follow them faithfully. Muhammad sees himself, not as revealing a new religion, but as calling everyone to be faithful followers of Abraham (see the commentary on Sûrah 11:75).

Sûrah 23 (from Mecca).

This section gives a primitive account of how human beings are made (verses 12-14). It tells the story of how Noah's revelation was rejected because he was only a mortal, and how Noah was saved and his opponents killed (verses 23-30). This set the pattern for future generations. For Muhammad, Noah's being saved and the disbelievers being killed is an example of what was happening to him and to those who opposed him.

The section goes on to speak of Moses and 'the son of Mary' (verse 50). It is full of advice as to what those who believe in God and God's revelation through Muhammad are to say when questioned.

Sûrah 24 (from Medina).

Most of this section consists in regulations for the purifying of home life. Muhammad is concerned to regulate every aspect of the lives of those who believe in God and who submit to the revelations given through him. In general the Quran upholds traditional Arabic practices, while legislating against blatant injustices.

Sûrah 24:2 and 4 'As for the adulterer and the adulteress, flog them each one hundred lashes ... Those who accuse chaste women, but do not then bring four witnesses, flog them eighty lashes, and never afterward accept any testimony from them'.

Such regulations are at home in seventh century tribal Arabia. The Quran is insisting on faithfulness and truthful witness.

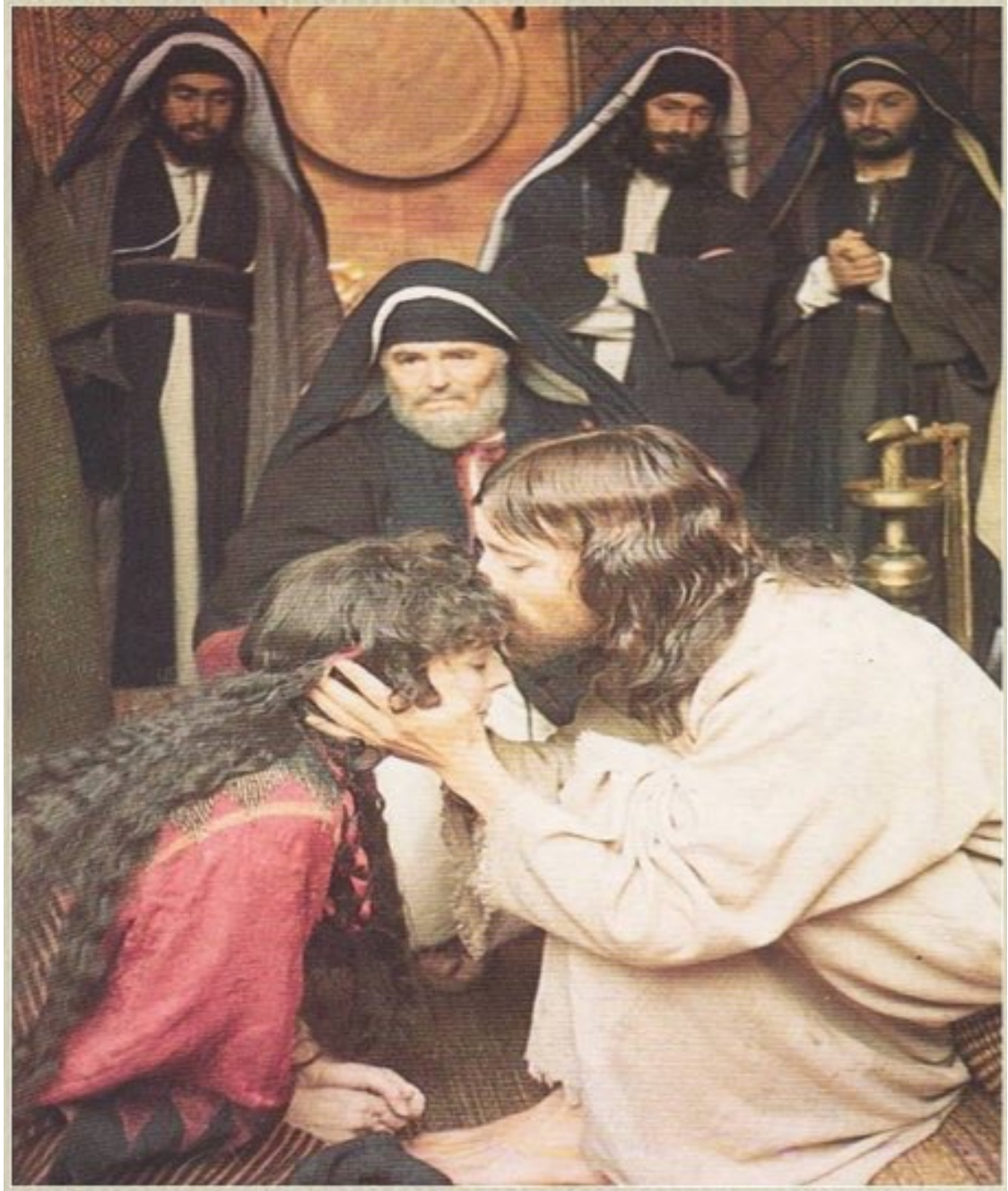
Jesus' attitude and teaching regarding human misbehaviour comes from his intimate knowledge of God. It is not for us to condemn people in their sin. Rather, we are to offer them the love that can rescue them from it. We find the following account in the Gospel of John, chapter 8:2-12.

'Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground.

When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again”.



Sûrah 24:31 *‘Tell the believing women to lower their eyes and to guard their private parts, and to not display their adornment except that which is visible thereof, and let them draw their kerchiefs over their breasts, and not display their adornment except to their husbands. [The text goes on to list the other males who are part of her family or the family of her husband]. Nor let them stamp their feet [dance] in such a way that the adornment they conceal becomes known’.*

Sûrah 24:60 *‘As for elderly women who no longer anticipate marriage there is no blame upon them to doff their garments [the thiyab] without displaying any ornament. And it is better for them to be modest, and God is Hearing, Knowing’.*

These verses have been used over the centuries to support various dress customs in cultures in which women are considered as male possessions. They should be read in the light of seventh century Arab dress customs. They are a call to modesty. The call to modesty is surely admirable so long as the way a woman is expected to dress is not imposed by men, and in God’s name.

Sûrah 25 (from Mecca).

This section lists the objections from his tribe, the Quraysh, against Muhammad's claim to be a Messenger to them from God.

It speaks, too, of the punishment of the Flood at the time of Noah (verse 37), and of the destruction of the towns of the Dead Sea at the time of Lot (verse 40). Caravans from Mecca to Syria passed by the Dead Sea. It was there for all to see. This sûrah acts as a warning to those who refuse to heed the revelations made through Muhammad. They must listen to God, the Creator of the universe.

Sûrah 25:56 *'We sent thee not save as a bearer of good news and as a warner.'*

The Quran regularly describes Muhammad's mission in these words.

Sûrah 25:57-58 'Say "I ask not of you any reward for it, save that whosoever decides may take a way unto his Lord. And trust in the Living One Who dies not, and hymn His praise. And God suffices as One aware of the sins of His servants'.

Muhammad is being encouraged not to seek any reward for what he is doing, except the reward of seeing people become faithful Muslims. He is to place his trust in God, and not be discouraged by his sins. God has chosen him. That is enough.

I am reminded of Paul's words: 'I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him ...I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead' (Philippians 3:8-11).

Sûrah 26 (from Mecca).

This section tells the story of Moses and Pharaoh (verses 10-68). It goes on to tell the story of Abraham (verses 69-104) and then Noah and the destruction of those who refused to believe (verse 106ff).

The Arabian tribe of 'Ad rejected the prophesy of Hûd (verses 123-140). The Arabian tribe of Thamûd rejected the prophecy of Sâlih (verses 141-175). The people of Midian rejected the prophecy of Shu'eyb (verses 176-89).

The sûrah goes on to speak of God's 'revelation' through Muhammad (verses 190-227).

Sûrah 27 (from Mecca).

Among other things this section tells the story of Moses and the burning bush, and his miraculous staff (verses 7-14), and the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (verses 22-44). It also tells the story of the destruction of the cities of the Dead Sea (verses 45-58).

Sûrah 27:62 'He answers the one in distress when he calls upon Him and removes the evil ... Is there a god alongside God?'

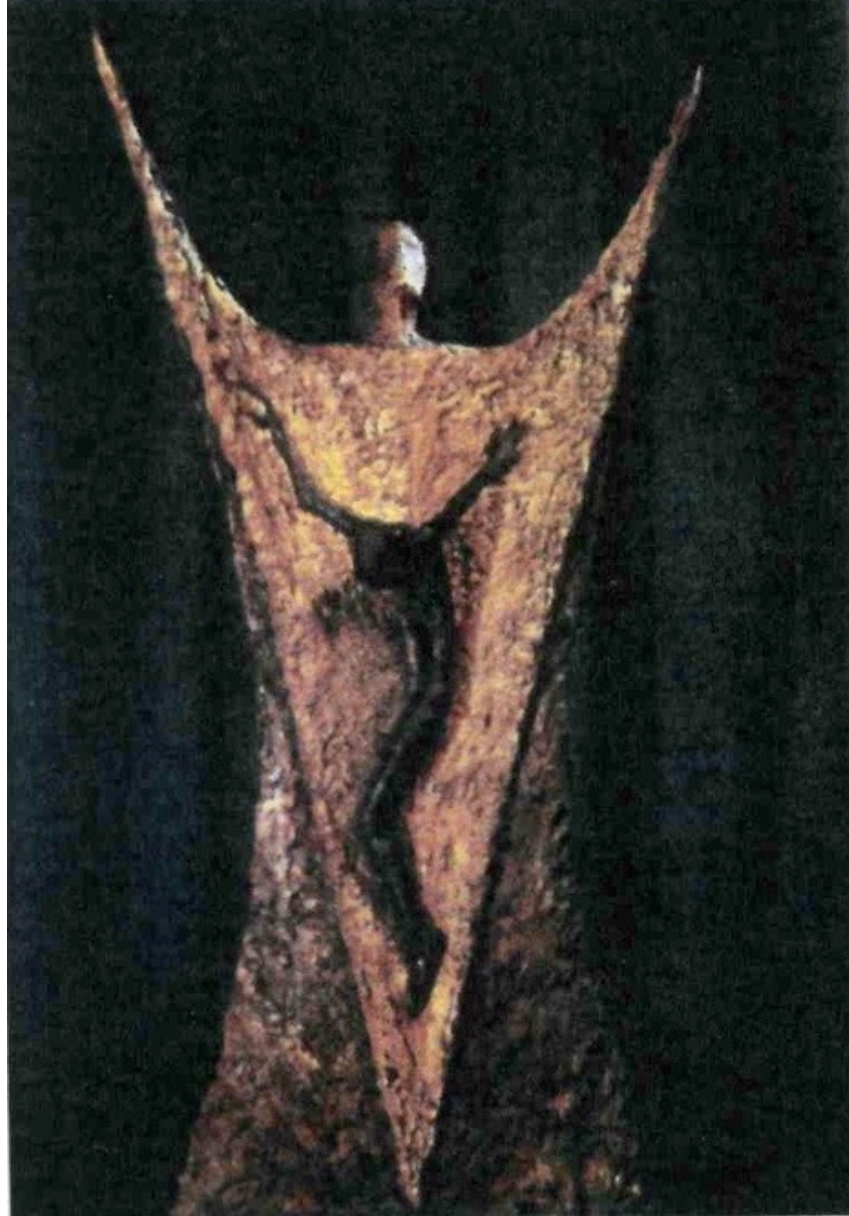
I am reminded of Jesus' prayer: 'Do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one' (Matthew 6:13).

Reflecting especially on Jesus' agony in Gethsemane and his cry from the cross, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes: 'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him out of death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission' (Hebrews 5:7).



Sûrah 27:79-81 'Trust in God; truly thou standest upon the manifest truth. Surely thou dost not make the dead hear, nor dost thou make the deaf hear the call when they turn their backs; Nor canst thou guide the blind away from their error. Thou canst only make hear those who believe in Our signs and are submitters'.

Muhammad's responsibility is to convey God's words. He is not responsible for others choosing to heed or not heed his words.



A trusting psalm