



CHAPTER 1

Al-Fātiḥah: The Opening

(REVEALED AT MAKKAH: 7 verses)

The *Fātiḥah* or the *Opening* is known under various other names. It is spoken of as the *Seven Oft-repeated Verses* in the Qur'ān itself (15:87), because its seven verses are constantly repeated by every Muslim in his prayers. It is spoken of as the *Fātiḥat al-Kitāb* or the *Opening of the Book* in a saying of the Holy Prophet, in which it is said that "no prayer is complete without the recitation of *Fātiḥat al-Kitāb*" (B. 10:95). Hence it is also called *Sūrat al-Ṣalāt*, i.e. the *chapter of Prayer*, being essential to every prayer whether performed in congregation or in private. It is also called *Sūrat al-Du'ā*, i.e., the *chapter of Supplication*, because the entire chapter is a supplication or a prayer to the Great Master. It is also known as *Umm al-Kitāb*, i.e., *the Basis of the Book*, because it contains the whole of the Qur'ān as it were in a nutshell. Some of the other names given to this chapter are *the Praise, the Thanksgiving, the Foundation, the Treasure, the Whole, the Sufficient, the Healer and the Healing*.

Al-Fātiḥah contains seven verses in a single section, and was revealed at Makkah, being without doubt one of the earliest revelations. It is a fact that the *Fātiḥah* formed an essential part of the Muslim prayers from the earliest days when prayer was made obligatory, and there is a vast mass of evidence showing that this happened very early after the Prophet's Call. For not only is the fact referred to in the earliest revelations, such as the 73rd chapter, but there are also other historical incidents showing that prayer was observed by the earliest Muslim converts.

The chapter is headed by the words *Bi-smi-llāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*, which also head every one of the other 113 chapters of the Holy Qur'ān with the exception of one only, the ninth, while the same sentence occurs once in the middle of a chapter, viz., in 27:30, thus occurring 114 times in the Holy Qur'ān. The phrase has besides acquired such a wide usage among the Muslims that it is the first thing which a Muslim child learns, and in his everyday affairs the *Bismillāh* is the first word which a Muslim utters.

The *Bismillāh* is the quintessence of the chapter *Fātiḥah*, in the same manner as the latter is the quintessence of the Qur'ān itself. By commencing every important affair with the *Bismillāh*, the Muslim in fact shows in the midst of his everyday life affairs that the right attitude of the human mind towards the Great Mind of the universe is that it should always seek a support in the Mighty One Who is the Source of all strength; and Faith in God, thus, finds expression in the practical life of a Muslim in a manner unapproached anywhere else in the history of religion.

The *Fātiḥah* has a special importance as a prayer. Its oft-repeated seven verses constitute the prayer for guidance of every Muslim at least thirty-two times a day, and therefore it has a much greater importance for him than the Lord's prayer for a Christian. There is another difference, too. The latter is instructed to pray for the coming

of the kingdom of God, whereas the Muslim is instructed to seek for his right place in that kingdom, which had already come, the hint no doubt being that the coming of the Prophet was really the advent of the kingdom of God about whose approach Jesus preached to his followers (Mark 1:15). The prayer contained in this chapter is the sublimest of all the prayers that exist in any religion, and occupies the first place among all the prayers contained in the Qur'ān itself. A chorus of praise has gone forth for it from the greatest detractors of the Holy Qur'ān. The entire chapter is composed of seven verses, the first three of which speak of the four chief Divine attributes, viz., providence, beneficence, mercy and requital, thus giving expression to the grandeur and praise of the Divine Being, and the last three lay open before the Great Maker the earnest desire of man's soul to walk in righteousness without stumbling on either side, while the middle one is expressive of man's entire dependence on Allāh. The attributes referred to are those which disclose Allāh's all-encompassing beneficence and care, and His unbounded love for all of His creatures, and the ideal to which the soul is made to aspire is the highest to which man can rise, the path of righteousness, the path of grace, and the path in which there is no stumbling. Thus, on the one hand, the narrow views that the Divine Being was the Lord of a particular nation are swept off before the mention of His equal providence and equal love for all mankind, nay for all the creatures that exist in all the worlds, and, on the other, the soul is made to aspire to the great spiritual eminence to which arose those to whom Allāh was gracious, the prophets, the truthful, the faithful and the righteous (4:69). One would in vain turn over the pages of sacred books to find anything approaching the grand and sublime ideas contained in this chapter of the Holy Qur'ān.

As I have said, the *Fātiḥah* is the quintessence of the whole of the Qur'ān. For the Qur'ān is a book which declares the glory of Allāh and teaches the right way to man, and both these themes find full expression in the *Fātiḥah*. The fundamental principles of faith, the prime attributes of the Divine Being, which are the basis of all other attributes, the relation which ought to hold between man and his Creator, are all contained in their essence in the seven short sentences of which this wonderful chapter is made up. And to crown all, this chapter opens with the broadest possible conception of the Lordship of the Divine Being and the brotherhood of man, nay of the oneness of all creation, for the unity of the creation necessarily follows the unity of the Creator.

In^a the name of Allāh,^b the Beneficent, the Merciful.^c بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

1 Praise be to Allāh, the Lord^a of the worlds,^b

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ۝

2 The Beneficent, the Merciful,

الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ ۝

3 Master^a of the day of Requital.^b

مَلِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ ۝

4 Thee do we serve and Thee do we beseech for help.^a

إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ ۝

5 Guide us on^a the right path,

اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ ۝

6 The path of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed favours,^a

صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ

7 Not those upon whom wrath is brought down, nor those who go astray.^a

لْمَعْصُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ ۝

a. I retain the ordinary translation of the particle *bā*, but I must warn the reader that the sense of this particle is not the same in Arabic as the sense of the word *in* in the equivalent phrase *in the name of God*. *In*, in the latter case, signifies *on account of*, whereas the *bā* in Arabic signifies *by*, or *through*, or, to be more exact, *with the assistance of*. The phrase is in fact equivalent to: *I seek the assistance of Allāh, the Beneficent, the Merciful* (AH). Hence it is that a Muslim is required to begin every important affair with *Bismillāh*.

b. *Allāh*, according to the most correct of the opinions respecting it, is a proper name applied to *the Being Who exists necessarily by Himself, comprising all the attributes of perfection* (T-LL), the *al* being inseparable from it, not derived (Msb-LL). *Al-ilāh* is a different word, and *Allāh* is not a contraction of *al-ilāh*. The word *Allāh* is not applied to any being except the only true God, and comprises all the excellent names, and the Arabs never gave the name *Allāh* to any of their numerous idols. Hence, as being the proper name of the Divine Being and not having any equivalent in any other language, I have adopted the original word in this translation.

c. *Rahmān* and *Rahīm* are both derived from *rahmat*, signifying *tenderness requiring the exercise of beneficence* (R), and thus comprising the ideas of *love* and *mercy*. *Al-Rahmān* and *al-Rahīm* are both active participle nouns of different measures denoting intensiveness of significance, the former being of the measure of *fa'lān* and indicating the greatest preponderance of the quality of mercy, and the latter being of the measure of *fa'īl* and being expressive of a constant repetition and manifestation of the attribute (AH). The Prophet is reported to have said: "*Al-Rahmān* is the Beneficent God Whose love and mercy are manifested in the creation of this world, and *al-Rahīm* is the Merciful God Whose love and mercy are manifested in the state that comes after" (AH), i.e. in the consequences of the deeds of men. Thus the former is expressive of the utmost degree of love and generosity, the latter of unbounded and constant favour and mercy. Lexicologists agree in holding that the former includes both the believer and the unbeliever for its objects, while the latter relates specially to the believer (LL). Hence I render *al-Rahmān* as meaning the *Beneficent*, because the idea of doing good is predominant in it, though I must admit that the English language lacks an equivalent of *al-Rahmān*.

1a. The Arabic word *Rabb* conveys not only the idea of *fostering, bringing-up, or nourishing* but also that of *regulating, completing and accomplishing* (T-LL), i.e., of the evolution of things from the crudest state to that of the highest perfection. According to R, *Rabb* signifies *the fostering of a thing in such a manner as to make it attain one condition after another until it reaches its goal of completion*. Hence *Rabb* is the Author of all existence, Who has not only given to the whole creation its means of nourishment but has also beforehand ordained for each a sphere of capacity and within that sphere provided the means by which it continues to attain gradually to its goal of perfection. By the use of the word *Rabb* the Holy Qur'ān thus hints at the law of evolution which is working in the universe. There is no single word in English carrying the significance of the word *Rabb* — *Nourisher unto perfection* would be nearest; but the word *Lord* has generally been adopted for the sake of brevity. *Rabb* or *Nourisher to perfection*, however, includes both the physical and spiritual sides so far as man is concerned, His Word being the spiritual nourishment through which man is brought to perfection.

1b. The word translated as *worlds* is *'ālamīn*, which is plural of *'ālam* (from the root *'ilm*, to know), indicating literally *that by means of which one knows a thing*, and hence it signifies *world or creation*, because by it the Creator is known. In a restricted sense it is applied to *any class or division of created beings or of mankind* (LL). Hence *'ālamīn* has been translated as “nations” in 2:47 and elsewhere. The all-comprehensiveness of the Lordship of Allāh in the very first words of the Qur'ān is quite in consonance with the cosmopolitan nature of the religion of Islām, which requires an admission of the truth of the prophets of all nations.

3a. English translations have usually adopted *King* as the translation of the word *Mālik*, which is not correct. *Mālik* and *malik* are two different words from the same root, the former signifying *master* and the latter *king*. According to the rule of forming derivations in Arabic, an additional letter (as the *alif* in *Mālik*) gives the meaning a greater intensity (AH), and hence a master is more than a king. The adoption of the word *mālik* or *master* is to show that Allāh is not guilty of injustice if He forgives His servants, because He is not a mere king or a mere judge, but more properly a Master.

3b. The word *yaum* is applied in the Holy Qur'ān to any period of time, from a moment (55:29) to fifty thousand years (70:4), and may therefore indicate an indefinitely small or indefinitely large space of time. According to LL, *yaum* is a *time*, whether *day* or *night, time absolutely*, whether *night* or *not, little* or *not*; also a *day*, meaning the period from the rising of the sun to its setting. According to R, the word *yaum* indicates a *period of time, whatever period it may be*, and this is the proper signification. As there are ample indications in the Qur'ān that the Divine law of requital is working every moment, and there is nothing to support the idea that it will not come into force before a particular day, the law of requital referred to in this verse is therefore a law which is constantly at work, the day of Judgment being the day of complete manifestation of it. *Master of the day of Requital* in fact stands for *Master of the law of Requital*, as that law is working every moment.

The word *dīn* means both *requital* and *religion*, being derived from *dāna*, *he recompensed, judged, obeyed* (LL). In describing God as Master of the day of Requital, the Holy Qur'ān lays stress, on the one hand, on the fact that the Divine law of requital of deeds is working every moment, and thus makes man feel the responsibility of what he does, and gives prominence, on the other, to the quality of forgiveness in Divine nature so that the law of requital is not like a rigid law of nature but like the dealing of a Master Who is essentially merciful, as already described. In speaking of the law of *requital* after the two great attributes of *beneficence* and *mercy*, the aim is to show that requital is as essential a Divine attribute to bring humanity to perfection as the attributes of beneficence and mercy. Beneficence is exercised towards the whole of humanity, mercy towards those who accept the Truth, and through requital are brought to perfection those who do not accept the Truth. Their punishment sometimes takes the form of distress and affliction in this life but it will receive a final shape on the day of Judgment. Both the afflictions of this life and the hell of the Hereafter are really remedial measures to exter-

minate spiritual diseases, and awaken spiritual life in man.

It may be further noted that God may also be said to be the Master of the day of Religion, in the sense that spiritual awakening will gradually be brought about in the world, so that ultimately the majority of people will recognize the truth of religion. The law of evolution is, in fact, working spiritually as it is working physically in this vast creation.

4a. The first three verses of this *sūrah* speak of the grandeur of God and the last three of the aspiration of man's soul to attain spiritual loftiness, while this, the middle verse, speaks of the relation of the spirit of man to the Divine Spirit. Here the way is pointed out through which man can attain to real greatness. It is through 'ibādāt of God which means *obedience* (tā'at) combined with complete humility (khubū') (R), and through isti'ānat, or seeking help ('aun) from God. The idea of 'ibādāt (*service or worship*) in Islām is not a mere declaration of the glory of God, but the imbibing of Divine morals and receiving their impress through humble service to God; hence the prayer for Divine help.

5a. *Hidāyat* (guidance) means not only *showing the way* but also *leading one on the right way till one reaches the goal*. This is the significance here. Through Divine help man seeks to be guided in the right path until he reaches his goal of perfection. Man indeed stands in need of guidance and light from God in his everyday life affairs and is therefore taught to look for light in the right direction, for light from God. But he needs this light in a greater degree for attaining to the great spiritual goal. What that goal is, is stated in the next verse.

6a. Those upon whom favours are bestowed are according to I'Ab the four classes mentioned in 4:69, viz., the prophets, the truthful, the faithful and the righteous (AH). It is in the footsteps of these spiritual leaders of the world that the Muslim aspires to walk, the chief aim of his life thus being not only his own spiritual perfection but to try also, and lay down his very life, for the spiritual perfection of others. He thus also prays for the Divine favours which were vouchsafed to the righteous in the uprooting of evil and establishing good in the world. It further shows that according to the Holy Qur'ān the favours that were bestowed upon the prophets — the gift of Divine revelation being one of them — can still be bestowed upon the righteous who follow the right way. It should, however, be borne in mind that prophethood and revelation are two different things, because the gift of revelation was, according to the express teachings of the Holy Qur'ān, granted to others than prophets as well; as, for instance, to the mother of Moses (20:38) and to the disciples of Jesus Christ (5:111). This gift of revelation or being spoken to by God, according to most authentic ḥadīth, will be granted to the righteous among the Holy Prophet's followers — *there will be among them men to whom God will speak though they would not be prophets* (B. 62:6).

7a. The Muslims are warned here that even after receiving Divine favours they may incur Divine displeasure and go astray from the path which leads to the goal of perfection, and this is what the prayer of v. 7 aims at. The Holy Qur'ān speaks of the Jews as incurring Divine displeasure (2:61, 90; 3:112; 5:60) and it speaks of the Christians as having gone astray (5:77), and the Prophet is reported to have said: "Those upon whom wrath is brought down are the Jews and those who went astray are the Christians" (Tr. 44:2). Of course, the words are only explanatory and do not limit the significance of the original words used. The Jews afford an example of a people failing in righteous deeds, in carrying out the spirit of the doctrine while retaining the doctrine, and the Christians an example of a people corrupting the doctrine itself, and both these are the pitfalls of a people to whom the right direction has been pointed out. Again, the Jews and the Christians afford an example of the two extremes, the Jews rejecting Jesus, a prophet of God, as a liar, and doing their utmost to slay him, and the Christians raising a mortal prophet to the dignity of Godhead. The Muslims are thus taught a prayer that they may neither fail in good deeds while retaining the letter of the law, nor corrupt the doctrine, and that they may be kept on the middle path, avoiding either extreme.