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Surah An-Najm

The Star · Makki · 62 ayat — reflections on surah 53 of the Qur'an

QURAN

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September 2026 · v1.304.1

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Surah An-Najm

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النجم — An-Najm, "The Star". Surah 53 of 114, revealed in Makkah, 62 ayat. The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/53/.

ONE

The surah in brief

Muhammad speaks not from desire but by revelation, and the surah recounts his witnessing of Gabriel and the wonders shown at the Ascension. It refutes the idols al-Lat, al-Uzza, and Manat, affirms that none bears another's burden, and warns that the Hour draws near.

An-Najm swears by the setting star that the Prophet has neither strayed nor erred, and that he speaks nothing of his own desire — it is revelation revealed (53:2–4). It recounts the great vision at the Lote Tree of the Farthest Boundary (53:14–18) and demolishes the goddesses al-Lat, al-'Uzza, and Manat as mere names their forefathers invented (53:19–23). It lays down enduring principles — no soul bears another's burden, and a person has only what he strives for (53:38–39) — and reminds that it is Allah who makes one laugh and weep, who gives death and life. The first surah recited aloud in Mecca, it ends with a prostration the pagans themselves could not resist.

TWO

Its themes

- Truthfulness of revelation
- The vision at the Lote Tree
- Refutation of the goddesses
- Personal accountability
- Allah as source of all states
- The call to prostrate

THREE

Key verses

Nor does he say (aught) of (his own) Desire.

Qur'an 53:3

'Nor does he speak from desire; it is but revelation revealed' guarantees that the Prophet's teaching is not his own opinion; Ibn Kathir cites this in support of the authority of his Sunnah alongside the Qur'an.

Those who avoid great sins and shameful deeds, only (falling into) small faults,- verily thy Lord is ample in forgiveness. He knows you well when He brings you out of the earth, And when ye are hidden in your mothers' wombs. Therefore justify not yourselves: He knows best who it is that guards against evil.

Qur'an 53:32

'So do not claim yourselves pure; He knows best who is righteous' guards against self-praise; al-Sa'di reads it as a summons to humility, since Allah alone weighs the heart.

Namely, that no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another;

Qur'an 53:38

'No bearer of burdens bears the burden of another' establishes personal responsibility; al-Tabari uses it to close the door on the idea that another's sin or salvation can be transferred.

That man can have nothing but what he strives for;

Qur'an 53:39

'Man has nothing but what he strives for' honors effort over wishful thinking; al-Qurtubi discusses how this frames reward as tied to sincere striving, while mercy remains Allah's to bestow.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context & character

An-Najm (The Star) is an early Makkan surah, and it holds a singular place in the biography of the Prophet ﷺ: it is remembered as the first surah he recited aloud publicly before the Quraysh at the Ka'ba, and when he reached its closing command to prostrate, everyone present — believers and idolaters alike — fell down in prostration, so overpowering was its majesty (reported in al-Bukhari from Ibn Mas'ud). It is thus the first place the prostration of recitation was performed in the open.

The surah takes its name from the opening oath, 'By the star when it descends' (53:1). Its whole purpose is to defend the truth of the revelation and the sanity and sincerity of the one who brought it, and then to demolish the intellectual and spiritual foundations of Makkan idolatry. Its mood is at once soaring and severe — soaring in its account of the Prophet's vision at the highest horizon, severe in its verdict on those who worship names their fathers invented.

The later fabricated tale of the 'gharaniq' (the so-called 'satanic verses') attaches itself to this surah, but it is rejected by the verifying scholars of hadith as baseless; nothing in an authentic chain supports it, and it contradicts the very message of the surah, which is that the Prophet ﷺ 'does not speak from desire' (53:3).

How the surah unfolds

The surah opens with a solemn oath and an immediate defense of the Prophet ﷺ: your companion has neither strayed nor erred, nor does he speak out of his own desire — it is nothing but revelation revealed (53:1–4). It then describes the mighty one of great power who taught him, who appeared on the highest horizon, then drew near until he was ‘two bow-lengths away or nearer’ (53:9). The majority of the Companions, following Ibn Mas‘ud, understood this as the Prophet’s vision of the angel Jibril in his true created form; the heart did not lie about what it saw (53:11).

A second sighting is placed at the Lote-tree of the utmost boundary (sidrat al-muntaha), near the Garden of Refuge, when the tree was covered by that which covered it, and ‘the sight did not swerve, nor did it transgress’ (53:17). There he saw the greatest of the signs of his Lord. Whether the Prophet ﷺ saw his Lord Himself is a point the scholars debated: ‘A’isha firmly denied that he saw God with his eyes, while Ibn ‘Abbas transmitted that he saw Him with his heart; the surah’s own words point most directly to the sighting of the greatest signs.

From the heights the surah turns to the idols: have you considered al-Lat, al-‘Uzza, and Manat the third (53:19–20)? It exposes the absurdity of a people who assigned daughters to God while preferring sons for themselves — ‘that would be an unjust division’ (53:22). These deities, it declares, are ‘but names you have named, you and your fathers, for which God sent down no authority’ (53:23); the idolaters follow nothing but conjecture (zann) and the whims of their souls.

The surah then broadens into a meditation on divine sovereignty and human accountability. Intercession avails nothing except by God's leave (53:26); those who deny the Hereafter name the angels with female names, following mere guesswork against certain truth. God knows best who has strayed and who is guided; He created you and knew you when you were embryos, so 'do not claim purity for yourselves' (53:32).

Finally it confronts the man who turned away, gave a little, and then withheld (53:33–34) — has he not been told of what is in the scrolls of Musa and of Ibrahim who fulfilled his covenant? There follows the ancient charter carried by every prophet: that no bearer of burdens bears the burden of another, that man shall have nothing but what he strove for, and that his striving will be seen and fully recompensed (53:38–41). A cascade of divine acts follows — He it is who makes one laugh and weep, gives death and life, creates the pair from a drop, enriches and satisfies, and destroyed 'Ad, Thamud, the people of Nuh, and the overturned cities (53:43–54). The Hour has drawn near; so, the surah closes, 'prostrate to God and worship' (53:62) — the verse at which its first hearers fell down.

The major themes, in depth

The first great theme is the authenticity of revelation. The surah stakes everything on the trustworthiness of the Prophet ﷺ; he is not deluded, not driven by ego, not inventing. The account of the two visions is meant to establish that what he conveys reaches him from the very edge of the created cosmos, at the Lote-tree beyond which none passes. Against a people who

accused him of poetry, sorcery, and madness, the surah answers that his eyes did not deceive him and his heart did not lie.

The second theme is the war between conjecture and certainty. Makkan idolatry, the surah insists, rests on nothing but guesswork — inherited names, wishful thinking, and the desire of the soul. 'They have no knowledge of it; they follow nothing but conjecture, and conjecture avails nothing against the truth' (53:28). This is one of the Qur'an's sharpest epistemological verdicts: belief must rest on revealed certainty and evidence, not on ancestral habit or emotional preference.

The third theme is strict personal accountability, condensed in the 'scrolls of Ibrahim and Musa.' 'That no bearer of burdens shall bear the burden of another, and that man shall have nothing but what he strove for' (53:38–39) became a foundation of Islamic ethics: no vicarious sin, no inherited guilt, no salvation borrowed from another. Each soul rises or falls by its own effort, which God sees and rewards in full.

The fourth theme is that God alone authors the whole drama of existence. The rapid verses — He makes you laugh and weep, live and die, He enriches and He satisfies, He is Lord of Sirius (the star some Arabs worshipped) — collapse every rival claim. Even the star they revered has a Lord. And the same hand that shaped the embryo will raise the dead for the second creation.

Points of reflection

An-Najm calls the reader to a settled certainty about revelation and a corresponding suspicion of everything built on mere conjecture and inherited custom. Much of what people cling to, then and now, is 'names you have named' — labels without substance. The surah invites us to test our convictions against knowledge rather than sentiment.

Its warning against self-purification — 'do not claim purity for yourselves; He knows best who is righteous' (53:32) — cultivates humility. Coupled with the mercy promised to those who avoid the major sins and shameful deeds (53:32), it teaches a balance of hope and fear: strive earnestly, but never presume upon your own goodness.

The charter of the scrolls reframes the whole of life as striving that will be seen and repaid. And the surah's ending — 'do you marvel at this discourse, and laugh and do not weep?' (53:59–60) — is a direct summons out of heedless amusement into worship. Its final word is prostration: the proper response to the God who owns the first life and the last is to fall down before Him.

FIVE

Carrying it

1. Trust that the Prophet's guidance is revelation, not personal opinion.
2. Do not boast of your own purity; leave the verdict to the One who knows hearts.
3. Own your deeds — no one else carries your burden or earns your reward.
4. Let laughter, tears, life, and death all return your gaze to their true Author.

Where this reading draws from. Ibn Kathir, al-Tabari, al-Sa'di, al-Qurtubi. A summary is not a tafsir: for the verse-by-verse treatment go to the works themselves, or to the close studies at deen2u.com/tadabbur/.