

# AL-FĀTIHAH

(The Opening)

This Sūrah is Makkan, and comprises of seven verses

## The Merits and Peculiarities of the Sūrah

This Sūrah (Chapter) of the Holy Qur'ān possesses a number of merits peculiar to it. Firstly, the Holy Qur'ān begins with it; the prescribed prayer begins with it; and even in the order of revelation this is the first Surah which was revealed to the Holy Prophet ﷺ in its complete form. Some verses of the Sūrahs Iqra' (al-'Alaq), al-Muzzammil and al-Muddaththir had no doubt been revealed earlier, but the first Sūrah to be revealed in a complete form is no other than this. Certain Companions of the Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم have reported that this was the first Sūrah to be revealed. Most probably they had meant that no Sūrah had been revealed in a complete form before this. Perhaps that is why the Sūrah has been named as '*Fātihatul-Kitāb*' (The Opening of the Book).

The other important peculiarity of the Sūrah is that it is, so to say, the quintessence of the Holy Qur'ān, and the rest of the Qur'ān is its elaboration. The Sūrah may thus be delineated for two reasons. Firstly, all that the Holy Qur'ān has to say is, in one way or another, related to either of the two themes, faith (*Īmān*) and virtuous deeds (*al-'amal al-salih*), and the basic principles of the two have been

indicated in this Sūrah (See Rūḥ al-Ma'ānī and Rūḥ al-Bayān). That is why authentic Traditions (*Aḥādīth*) give to this Sūrah such titles as "*Umm al-Qur'ān*" (Essence of the Qur'ān), "*Umm al-Kitāb*" (Essence of the Book), "*Al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*" (Glorious Qur'ān).

Secondly, this Sūrah gives a special instruction to the man who begins the recitation or the study of the Qur'ān – that he should approach this book with a mind cleansed of all his previous thoughts and opinions, seeking nothing but the Truth and the right path, praying to Allāh for being guided in the right path. The Sūrah begins with the praise of Him before whom the request is to be submitted, and ends with the request for guidance. The whole of the Qur'ān is the answer to this request. The answer begins with the words: "*Alif Lām Mīm. This is the Book*", which is an indication that the guidance man had prayed for has been provided in this Book.

The Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم has said, "I swear by Allah who is the master of my life, neither the Torah, nor the Evangile nor the Psalms of David have anything to compare with the Opening Chapter of the Qur'ān, and no other Chapter of the Qur'ān itself can compare with it." (Reported by the Companion Abū Hurairah رضى الله عنه).

The Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم has also said that this Sūrah is a cure for all kinds of illnesses. According to another Tradition (*Ḥādīth*), the Sūrah has also been named the "Cure" (*Al-Shifā*), (See Qurtūbī), and al-Bukhārī reports from the Companion Anas that the Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم has called this Sūrah the greatest among all the Sūrahs of the Holy Qur'ān. (See Qurtūbī)

﴿ بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ ﴾

(I begin) with the name of Allah, the All-Merciful, the Very-Merciful.

### ***Bismillāh* is a verse of the Holy Qur'ān**

There is consensus of all the Muslims on the fact that *Bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm* is a verse of the Holy Qur'ān, being a part of the Sūrah al-Naml (The Ant); and there is also an agreement on that this

verse is written at the head of every Sūrah except the Sūrah al-Taubah. But there is a difference of opinion among the *Mujtāhids* (the authentic scholars who are entitled to express an opinion in such matters) as to whether this verse is an integral part of the Sūrah al-Fatihah or of all the Sūrahs or not. According to the great Imām Abū Ḥanīfah, it is not an integral part of any Sūrah except al-Naml, rather it is in itself an independent verse of the Holy Qur'an which has been revealed for being placed at the beginning of every Surah in order to separate and distinguish one Sūrah from another.

### The merits of *Bismillāh*

It was a custom in the Age of Ignorance (*Jāhiliyyah*) before the advent of Islam that people began everything they did with the names of their idols or gods. It was to eradicate this practice that the first verse of the Holy Qur'an which the Archangel Jibrā'il brought down to the Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم commanded him to begin the Qur'an with the name of Allah *اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ*: "Read with the name of your Lord."

The famous commentator al-Suyuti says that beside the Holy Qur'an all the other divine books too begin with *Bismillāh*. Certain other scholars are of the opinion that *Bismillāh Al-Raḥmān Al-Raḥīm* is peculiar to the Qur'an and to the followers of Muḥammad ﷺ. The two views can be brought into agreement with each other if we say that all the divine books share the common trait of beginning with the name of Allah, but the words *Bismillāh Al-Raḥmān Al-Raḥīm* are peculiar to the Holy Qur'an, as is evident from certain Traditions (*Aḥādīth*) which report that in order to begin with the name of Allah anything he undertook, the Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم used to say the words *بِسْمِكَ اللَّهُمَّ* (*Bismikā Allāhumma*), but when the verse *Bismillah Al-Raḥman Al-Raḥim* was revealed, he adopted these words. Since then this practice was established through the verbal command of the Holy Prophet ﷺ or through his act or tacit approval). (See Qurtubī and Rūh al-Ma'ānī)

The Holy Qur'an again and again instructs us to begin what we do with the name of Allah. The Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم has said that no important work receives the blessings of Allah, unless it is begun

with His name. According to yet another *ḥadīth* (Tradition), closing the door of one's house, putting out the lamp, covering a vessel, should all be done with the recitation of *Bismillāh*. The Holy Qur'ān and the *ahādīth* (Traditions) repeatedly instruct us to recite this verse while taking food, drinking water, performing the *wudū* (ablution), getting on a carriage or getting down from it. (See *Qurtubī*)

By instructing man to begin everything with the name of Allah, Islam has given to the whole of his life an orientation towards Allah so that he may, with each step he takes, renew his allegiance to the covenant with Allah that nothing he does, not even his very being can come into existence without the will and the help of Allah. Thus, all the economic and worldly activities of man, each movement and gesture becomes transformed into an act of worship.<sup>1</sup> How brief is the action, which consumes neither time nor energy, and yet how immense is the gain -- it is a regular alchemy, transmuting the profane (*dunyā*) into the sacred (*dīn*); a disbeliever eats and drinks just as a Muslim does but in saying '*Bismillāh*' as he begins to eat, the Muslim affirms that it was not in his power to obtain this little morsel of food which has passed through innumerable stages from the sowing of the seed to the reaping of the grain corn, and which has during this process required the labours of the wind, the rain, the sun, of the heavens and of the earth, and of a thousand men -- and that it is Allah alone who has granted him this morsel of food or this draught of water by making it go through all these stages. A disbeliever goes to sleep, wakes up and goes about as much as a Muslim. But while going to sleep or waking up, the Muslim mentions the name of Allah, renewing his relationship with Him. Thus his economic and worldly needs and activities acquire the nature of the remembrance of Allah, and are counted as acts of worship. Similarly, in saying '*Bismillāh*' while getting on to a carriage, the Muslim testifies to the fact that it is beyond the power of man to produce this carriage and to procure it for him, and that it is only the infallible and divinely-created order of

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1. This is the only way in which human life can, to use a word dear to modern cultural anthropology, be sacralized in any meaningful sense of the term -- Translator

things that has brought together from all the corners of the world the wood, the steel and other metals which have gone into the making of the carriage, as well as the mechanics who have given a particular shape to these components, and the driver -- and finally put all these into the service of man who can make use of the labour of this army of the creatures of man who can God by spending a few coins. And even these coins have not been created by him, it is Allah himself who has provided the complex ways and means of earning them. Veritably, '*Bismillāh*' is the legendary philosopher's stone which transmutes, not copper, but mere dust into the purest of gold. **فَلِلّٰهِ الْحَمْدُ عَلَىٰ دِيْنِ الْاِسْلَامِ وَتَعْلِيْمَاتِهِ**. 'So then, praised be Allah for the religion of Islam and its teachings.'

### Ruling

'Before beginning to recite the Qur'an, it is *sunnah* to first say **أَعُوْذُ بِاللّٰهِ مِنَ الشَّيْطٰنِ الرَّجِيْمِ** (I seek refuge with Allah from Satan -- the accursed) and then **بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِيْمِ** (I begin with the name of Allah, the All-Merciful, the Very-Merciful). And during the *tilāwah* (the recitation of the Holy Qur'an) as well, saying **بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ**: '*Bismillah*... at the beginning of each Sūrah, except the Sūrah Al-Bara'ah (al-Taūbah), is *Sunnah*.

### Commentary

'*Bismillāh*': This phrase is composed of three words -- the letter '*Bā*', '*Ism*' and '*Allah*'. The preposition '*Ba*' has several connotations in Arabic, three of which are appropriate to the occasion. All the three are applicable here: (1) Contiguity, or the close proximity between one thing and the other; (2) Seeking the aid of someone or something; (3) To seek the blessings of someone.

The word '*Ism*' has many lexical and intellectual nuances of meaning, the knowledge of which would not be essential for the average reader. It is sufficient to know that this word is translated in English as 'Name'.

The word, '*Allah*' is the greatest and the most comprehensive of the divine names. According to some scholars, it is the 'Great Name', or '*Al-Ism al-Ā'zam*'. (According to the Tradition (*Hadīth*), the Great Name carries with it such a benediction that a prayer is granted when this word has been uttered. Reports differ as to what this Great Name

is). The word 'Allah' refers to the Essence, and hence this name cannot be given to anyone except Allah. That is why this word has neither a plural nor a dual, for Allah is One and has no associate. In short, Allah is the name of that Ultimate Reality which comprehends in Itself all the attributes of perfection, which is the creator and sustainer, unique and peerless.

Thus, the phrase '*Bismillāh*' has these three respective significations according to the three connotations of the preposition '*Ba*':

- (a) With the name of Allah
- (b) With the help of the name of Allah
- (c) With the *barakah* or benediction of the name of Allah.

But, in all the three forms, the phrase obviously remains incomplete unless one mentions the work which one intends to begin with the name of Allah or with its help or benediction. So, according to the rules of grammar, some verb is taken to be understood here which should be suitable for the occasion -- e.g., 'I begin or recite with the name of Allah.' Propriety demands that even this verb should be understood to occur after the phrase, so that one does actually begin with the name of Allah and the verb does not precede His name. The preposition '*Bā*' has, however, to be placed before the name of Allah, for it is an exigency of the Arabic language. But even in this respect the 'Uthmāni manuscript of the Holy Qur'an prepared by the third Caliph 'Uthmān رضى الله عنه has made the necessary modification in accordance with the consensus of the Companions of the Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم. The regular Arabic script requires the letter '*Bā*' here to be joined with the letter '*Alif*', producing this shape -- بِاسْمِ اللَّهِ. But the 'Uthmani manuscript has dropped the '*Alif*', and joined the letter '*Bā*' with the letter '*Sin*', making the '*Bā*' look like a part of the word '*Ism*', so that the beginning is made, in effect, with the name of Allah. That is why the letter '*Alif*' is not dropped in other combinations between the preposition '*Bā*' and the noun '*Ism*' -- for example, in the verse اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ (Iqrā' biismi Rabbik), the '*Alif*' is written along with the '*Bā*'. It is the peculiarity of '*Bismillāh*' alone that the letter '*Ba*' has been joined with the letter '*Sin*'.

Merciful) -- these two are the attributes of Allah Almighty. '*Rahmān*' signifies one whose mercy is common to all, and extends to the whole universe, to everything that will be created in the future. On the other hand, '*Rahīm*' signifies one whose mercy is perfect in all possible ways. That is why '*Rahmān*' is the exclusive attribute of Allah and the word is employed only when one is referring to Him. It is not permissible to qualify any created being as '*Rahmān*', for there cannot possibly be anyone else, beside Allah, whose mercy should be all-embracing and all-inclusive. Just like the word 'Allah', there is no dual or plural for the word '*Rahmān*' too, because these words are in their signification exclusive to the One and Absolute Being which does not permit the existence of a second or a third. (Tafsīr al-Qurtubī) The signification of the word '*Rahīm*', on the contrary, does not contain anything which it should be impossible to find in a created being, for a man may be perfectly merciful in his dealings with another man. So, the word '*Rahīm*' may justifiably be employed in the case of a human being -- as the Qur'an itself has used the word in speaking of the Holy Prophet ﷺ which is: بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ رَؤُوفٌ رَحِيمٌ (He is gentle and very merciful towards the Muslims).

**Ruling:** This would easily show that those who shorten names such as 'Abd al-Rahmān or Fadl al-Rahman into '*Rahmān*' are doing what is not permissible and are thus committing a sin.

Out of the 'Beautiful Names' ( الْأَسْمَاءُ الْحُسْنَى : *Al-Asmā' al-Husnā*) of Allah Almighty and His attributes of perfection, only two have been mentioned in this verse - namely, '*al-Rahmān*' and '*al-Rahīm*' -, and both have been derived from the root '*Rahmah*' (mercy), indicating the all-pervasiveness and perfection of divine mercy. It points to the fact that the creation of the heavens and the earth and the sustenance of the whole universe has no other motivation than making manifest Allah's quality of mercy. He Himself had no need of these things, nor could anyone compel Him to create them. It is His own mercy which has required the creation and sustenance of the whole universal order.

How aptly this was put in Persian by poet *Rūmī*:

مانبودیم و تقاضا ما نبود  
لطف تو ناگفته مامی شنود

There was nothing -- neither our being nor our claim to be;  
It was Thy mercy that heard our unsaid.

### Injunctions and related considerations

The Holy Qur'an says: **فَإِذَا قَرَأْتَ الْقُرْآنَ فَاسْتَعِذْ بِاللَّهِ مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيمِ**: 'When you recite the Qur'an, seek the protection of Allah against Satan, the rejected one'.

According to the consensus of *Ummah*, it is a *Sunnah* to say *ta'awwudh*: **أَعُوذُ بِاللَّهِ مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيمِ** 'before the recitation of the Holy Qur'an whether in *Salāh* or out of *Salāh* (*Sharah al-munyah*). Saying *ta'awwudh* is peculiar to the recitation of the Holy Qur'an. Therefore, with the exception of *tilawah*, all other chores should be taken up by first saying '*Bismillāh*' only. Saying *ta'awwudh* is not a *sunnah* there. (Alamgiri, Chapter 4 - Al-Karahiyah)

One should begin the recitation of the Qur'an by reciting both **أَعُوذُ بِاللَّهِ** (I seek the protection of Allah) and **بِسْمِ اللَّهِ** (*Bismillāhi*: I begin with the name of Allah). During the recitation, one should repeat '*Bismillāh*', but not '*A'udhubillāh*', when one comes to the end of a *Sūrah* (or Chapter) and begins the next *Sūrah* -- with the sole exception of the *Sūrah* 'Al-Bara'ah' (الْبَرَاءَةُ). If one comes upon this particular *Sūrah* in the course of the recitation, one should not say '*Bismillāh*' before reading it. But if one happens to begin the recitation of the Holy Qur'an with this *Sūrah*, one should recite '*A'udhubillāh*' and '*Bismillāh*' both (Alamgiri from Al-Muḥit).

'*Bismillāh al-Rahmān al-Rahim*' is a verse of the Holy Qur'an and a part of the verse in *Sūrah* 'al-Naml'; it is also a regular verse when it occurs between two *Sūrahs*. It must, therefore, be treated with as much respect as the Holy Qur'an itself, and it is not permissible to touch it without having performed *wudu* (ablution). In the state of major ritual impurity (e.g., after the emission of semen, or during menstruation, or after child-birth), it is not allowed to even read this verse as recitation of the Holy Qur'an before having taken a ritual bath. One may, however, recite it as a form of prayer before beginning a work, like taking one's meals or drinking water under all conditions.

### Rulings:

(1) It is a *Sunnah* to recite '*Bismillāh*' after '*A'udhū-billah*' at the very beginning of the first *raka'ah* in the *salāh*. But views differ as to whether it should be recited in a loud or a low voice. *Īmām Abū*

Hanifah and certain other Imāms prefer it to be done in a low voice. There is a consensus on the point that '*Bismillāh*' should be recited at the beginning of all the succeeding *raka'ahs* too. This is unanimously considered to be a *Sunnah*; however, in some narrations, the reciting of '*Bismillāh*' at the beginning of every *raka'ah* has been identified as *wajib* or necessary.

(2) In the course of *salāh*, whether one is reciting the Holy Qur'an loudly or silently, one should not recite '*Bismillāh*' before beginning a Sūrah just after the Sūrah 'Fatihah'. Such a practice has not been reported either from the Holy Prophet ﷺ or from any of the first four *Khulafā'*. According to *Sharh al-munyah*, this is the view of Imām Abū Ḥanīfah and of Imām Abu Yusuf, and *Shrah al-munyah*, al-Durr al-Mukhtar, al-Burhan etc. prefer it to other views. But Imām Muḥammad considers it to be preferable that one should recite '*Bismillah*' if one is reciting the Holy Qur'an in a *salāh* offered silently. Certain reports attribute this view even to Imām Abū Ḥanīfah, and al-Shāmi has quoted some Muslim jurists in support of this view, -- which has been adopted even in 'Bahishti Zewar' of Maulanā Thānavi. Anyhow, there is a complete agreement among the scholars that it is not *makrūh* or reprehensible for some one to recite '*Bismillāh*' in this situation.

