

## Hermeneutical Reflections on the Human Condition as Established in Quranic Chapters Al 'Asr "Time" and At-Tin "The Fig", Informed by Inspirations from Exegete Said Nursi, in Light of Man's Accountability in this World

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### **Abstract**

*This philosophical article is located at the intersection of hermeneutics and literary analysis. Scriptures and exegeses have been studied as literature for a long time (Berlin, 2016). The premise is that the Quran is a literary text and so is the exegesis the Risale-i Nur (Nursi & Vahide, 1995; Nursi, 2005) which is a contemporary interpretation of the Quran, relevant to this discussion. The article presents a textual analysis and a discussion of general human condition in light of key verses from two surahs/chapters from the Quran, supported by interpretation and further explanation from selected thoughts of the Risale-i Nur (The Treatise of Light) (Nursi & Vahide, 1995; Nursi, 2005) and selected Hadiths/the Prophetic Traditions. The discussion leads to a synthesis where the extent of man's accountability in life and in this world is presented primarily in light of Nursi's interpretation. While weighing the impact of man's actions and the degree of his responsibility in his personal and social life, the article concludes by affirming the wisdom of surah Asr "Time" (Quran:103) in positioning the human as a contingent being who is at the mercy of a Higher Being who is in control of everything while sustaining man. The article showcases the condition of man as a state of 'loss' which is two-fold. Firstly, it is in terms of man's contribution to generating a lost society that is ravaged by man's egocentric actions, which may result in frustration, conflict, wars, economic and political turmoil, general chaos, and fear, among others. Secondly, it involves man's inability to deal with setbacks and calamities triggered by natural phenomena, which include diseases and other problems. Unless man remains patient, resilient, and submitted to the Higher Being, he cannot cope with and deal with these issues in his life. Thus, once he relies on the Higher Being and does not complain, man confirms the verses in surah At-Tin "The Fig" (Quran: 95), that states that man is of "best of stature", as God intended him to be. It is only patience in adversity, belief and trust in God, and gratitude that bring solace to man's condition.*

**Keywords:** Belief in God; human condition; The Quran; Exegesis; Risale-i Nur

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## Introduction

This article is philosophical and reflective in nature. It invites the reader into realms where he or she may have never imagined to penetrate. These realms are those of the unseen, of the esoteric, as described in the Quran and corroborated by the exegesis *Risale-i Nur*. The focus of the article is human condition as it is depicted in two chapters of the Quran. The author uses this depiction and juxtaposes it with relevant thoughts of the contemporary Quranic exegesis *Risale-i Nur* (The Treatise of Light) (Nursi & Vahide, 1995; Nursi, 2005) and utilises the juxtaposition as an equation to present human condition as determined by human characteristics, disposition, and behaviour in this world. The equation can also be considered a theoretical foundation on which to build and consolidate the argument made in this article with regard to the status of man in this era. The author detaches herself from the analyses as she simply presents and echoes the ideas of Nursi (Nursi & Vahide, 1995; Nursi, 2005).

The article is located at the intersection of hermeneutics and literary studies due to its focus on the Quran as well as the exegesis *Risale-i Nur* as literary texts. It seeks to frame the condition of the human being, implying man or mankind in general<sup>2</sup>, according to the Islamic worldview, as presented solely in the texts. The term “man” is what is used from now in the article. The article presents man as a typical being, the best creation of God but who, however, is in a state of loss.

The analysis and discussion are in light of an interpretation and explanation of selected verses from two *surahs* (chapters) of the Quran, namely verses 4-6 from *At-Tin/ The Fig* (Quran: 95) and the full *surah Al 'Asr/The Time* (Quran:103). The link between these verses and chapters is that they can be considered complementary verses which distinctly discuss the human condition in two ways, with the two ways complementing each other. Man is introduced in terms of his being a creation of a Higher Being. His God-given disposition and potential in life are also presented (*At-Tin*). On the other hand, man is either reprimanded or reminded by God that he is at a loss (*Al 'Asr*).

In *surah At-Tin* (Quran: 95:3), man is presented and established as a being created in “the best of stature” by God but God also warns that man

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<sup>2</sup> The Quran was revealed to the whole of mankind/humanity, not only to Muslims.

can also drop to a level lower than animal (Quran: 95:4). What does God mean when He clearly assesses man's position and condition in these terms and then He confirms that man is "at a loss" (Quran: Al 'Asr 103), with clear exceptions? This is fully presented and discussed in depth in the following sections.

After introducing these verses and their description, a synthesis is provided, which ties the theoretical underpinnings to the verses as well as to relevant lived experiences and concrete examples in man's life, in this world. This is done as an insight into the human condition as it is witnessed by all today and raised at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Nursi (Nursi & Vahide, 1995, Nursi, 2005).

A brief literature review linked to the topic is first provided. Then, an exposé of the Quran is done before the focus shifts to the verses which constitute the corpus. The data are analysed, interpreted, and evaluated leading to the conclusion of this article.

The verses in the Quran underpinning the discussion are:

(The Quran: 103 Al 'Asr "The Time")

*By time, Indeed, mankind is in loss, Except for those who have believed and done righteous deeds and advised each other to truth and advised each other to patience.*

and

(The Quran: 95 At-Tin "The Fig" : 4-6)

*In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.*

*Indeed, We have created man on the most excellent of patterns, Then sent him down to the lowest of the low, Except those who believe and do good deeds.*

### **Literature review**

The literature review below indicates key areas which have been studied and which are relevant to this discussion. However, any in-depth engagement with all the available literature would not fit the scope of this article. Only a brief reference to these literary texts is provided.

The human condition has been the subject of literary texts before. Arendt (1958), in her book entitled 'The Human Condition', analyses man by positioning him as someone who is unique, destined to act, in the public arena and in the private space - to act being perceived as a gift from birth. The active engagement of man with the world is man's purpose in this

world, as discussed by Arendt. The life of man revolves around work, and any other activity or action which proves that man is living (Saeidnia & Lang, 2017)

Further to being active, man generates results and outcomes, and makes progress through action. Eventually, through his works (in any sphere), man achieves a sense of eternity; his works live on. Man wishes he was immortal and realises that seeking immortality renders him weak. Arendt proposes contemplation as a way to negotiate man's search for immortality. The work of Arendt (1958) has invited a lot of reflections from all spheres. Nursi, who inspires the discussion in this article is another author who discusses the condition of man in his exegesis *Risale-i Nur* (Nursi & Vahide, 1995; Nursi, 2005), which invites deep philosophical engagement, as discussed closely below as the core discussion in the article.

With regard to further literature documenting the human condition during the past years, the focus has been on various aspects of man, especially with regard to him in adversity. The key studies, mentioned below, testify to the fact that the human being faces contemporary issues, either personally or in society. As a result, man is heavily impacted. These studies are mentioned in this literature review as examples corroborating the discussion of the human condition in verses from *At-Tin* and *Al-'Asr*.

Research has been done on the impact of disasters on the psyche and spirituality of individuals. In their article, Wilson and Moran (1998) offer practical solutions for those caregivers of religious organisations who facilitate recovery of victims from significant psychological trauma. They recommend a holistic approach to healing.

There has been psychological research done on the impact of climate change on the human psyche. In Gillespie's study (2013), the focus ranges from the reactions of human beings to reports of climate change, to the mental state of those engaged with climate change issues. There is a sense of denial that is noted from some with regard to climatic change reports. The psychological processes involved in navigating climate change issues are of interest. The fact that climate change has psychological repercussions is relevant to this article and is especially relevant in the discussion on the human condition. The human psyche is part and parcel of the God-given comprehensiveness of human nature. Any negative psychological impact on man affects human condition in general. It affects man as an individual as well as a collective.

Dodds (2021: 223) assesses the human psychological status with regard to dealing with climate change and COVID-19, which he claims are environmental crises. Human behaviour is an important factor during these phenomena. Climate anxiety may lead to “panic attacks, loss of appetite, irritability, weakness, and sleeplessness” (222). COVID-19 as a pandemic which evolves quickly, happens much faster, compared to climatic change above, and it is suggested to have clearer links between behaviour and consequence, which lead to even more dramatic reactions and consequences for the human being.

De Jong (2002) details the impact of conflict and terrorism on the psyche of the human, focussing on the public mental health and psychosocial aspects, which are examined. Conflict and terrorism affect man and his social and collective life.

Haas (2021), in their assessment of the impact of COVID-19 and psychology under the umbrella study of people and society in times of pandemic, describes the human being as a biopsychosocial unit. Man is called a phenomenon. (5) with uniqueness, diversity, and complexity. This view is justified in the context of human condition in this world of chaos. As it is depicted in Said Nursi's *Risale-i Nur* which corroborates the Quran, man is unique in his comprehensiveness.

The uniqueness and comprehensiveness of man is further discussed below to explain his condition as a human, from God's perspective. Before looking at man in detail, it is necessary to explain his source. Where he comes from is mentioned in the scriptures, notably in the Quran.

In terms of a review of studies which are on scriptures being researched as literature, Cohen and Berlin (2016) present multiple works addressing the issue in their edited volume. Berlin (2016: 326) claims that using literary approaches to reading and analysing the Bible has been done throughout history. However, she admits that a modern approach is to consider the Bible as a piece of literature as all other literary works, as opposed to what it was considered before, as Divinely-inspired literature necessitating an approach fit for classical literature. However, she raises concerns that biblical literature does not always follow classical literary rules.

Contrasting this with the Quranic literature which is studied using a literary approach, and which constitutes the main discussion in this article, it is imperative to mention that Quranic language and content have been

claimed to excel all literary styles (Ahmad, 2020; Nursi & Vahide, 1995), as it embodies all literary rules of eloquence, rhetoric, didactics, etc.

### **The Quran as a literary masterpiece with deep meaning – revealed in Arabic**

A brief discussion of the literary era is mentioned below. An in-depth discussion on it, however, is not in the ambit of this article.

The Holy Quran which was revealed in the 7th century over 23 years of period is inimitable in style, as expressed by Ahmad (2020) among many others. Described as a “living miracle book”, the Quran has been preserved over 1400 years. Its style is inimitable from the literary perspective. The language used in the Quran is of an entirely unknown and unmatched literary form. The structural features of the Quranic discourse are unique.

The Quran fitted the Arab society, even if it addresses the whole of humanity. The Arab society used to thrive in poetry, as fit for the era in which it was revealed. Prior revelations had been in other languages. Ahmad (2020) describes the literary value of the Quran as being of linguistic superiority, style, and clarity of message; as having strength of argument, and quality of rhetoric. Furthermore, the human inability to match even its shortest chapter till the end of time grant it an exquisite uniqueness. Moreover, no one has been able to produce anything resembling the Quran. Said Nursi corroborates the inimitable literary nature and value of the Quran. In his twenty-fifth word of ‘The Words’ from the *Risale-i Nur* volume (Nursi & Vahide, 1995), Nursi dissects the literary features of the Quran.

There is a wonderful eloquence and purity of style in the Qur’an’s word-order. From beginning to end, *Isharat al-I’jaz* (Signs of Miraculousness) (Nursi & Vahide, 1995) demonstrates this eloquence and conciseness in the word-order. The way in which the second, minute, and hour hands of a clock each completes the order of the others, that is the way all the sentences of the All-Wise Qur’an, and its words, and the order in the relationships between the sentences and words, have been expounded in *Isharat al-I’jaz*, from its first page to its last (Nursi & Vahide, 1995: 380).

**More knowledge on the Quran emphasising its relevance in the discussion on human condition – especially the ineffable significance of God as the Speaker of those verses**

The Quran is revered by Muslims as the last and final of four Revelations from God, namely The Psalms of David (*Zabur*), The Ten Commandments of Moses (*Torah*), and The Gospels of Jesus (*Injeel*). Knowledge of the previous scriptures is shared in the Quran as historical facts, presenting the followers of the previous pre-Quranic Scriptures as The People of the Book.

When the Quran was revealed, the Meccans already had a love of poetry, as mentioned earlier, as enthusiastic poets displayed their poetry on the Kaaba (Black cube built by prophet Abraham and his son Ismail). The Quran was thus received as eloquent literature, that would be recited and was meaningful. It was welcomed by the believers as a speech of God, from the unseen.

God reveals in the Quran that He chose the Arabic language for His last revelation: "Indeed, We have sent it down as an Arabic Quran that you might understand" (The Quran - Yusuf/Joseph 12:2).

He also justifies why He did not reveal it in any other language. (The Quran – Fussilat / "Explained in detail" 41:44):

And if We had made it a non-Arabic Qur'an, they would have said, "Why are its verses not explained in detail [in our language]? Is it a foreign [recitation] and an Arab [messenger]?" Say, "It is, for those who believe, a guidance and cure." And those who do not believe - in their ears is deafness, and it is upon them blindness.

For the non-believers of the time, the Quran was received as a challenge as many tried to imitate its eloquence. The Quran was regarded at the outset as eloquent poetry.

The Quran is also preserved as the '*Lauhim Mahfuz*' / The Preserved Tablet (The Quran 85:22). The meaning of the Quran remains dynamic and fluid for all ages. The Quran has been translated into multiple languages. The English translation is used for the purpose of this discussion. All of the versions of English translation are consistent and faithful to the original Arabic revelation. There is a Hadith/Prophetic tradition on the interpretation of the Quran which reads thus: "Each verse has an outer meaning, an inner meaning, a limit, and an aim, and each has roots, and

boughs, and branches...” Before discussing who man is, it is imperative to discuss the One who created man and who spoke to man in the Quran.

**Who is God? The Author and Speaker of the Quran – according to the Quran and discussed in Risale-i Nur (Nursi & Vahide, 1995). Man’s accountability vis-à-vis God who sustains him**

Man is accountable for his acts (The Quran). Man, being the ‘Khalifa’ of God, His vicegerent on earth, somewhat mirrors some of God’s attributes but only an iota thereof, incomparable to The Creator Himself. The attributes or Beautiful Names of God are mentioned in the Quran as the ‘Asma al Husna’, for instance in *surah* Al-Hashr (The Quran 59: 22-24), God is:

*“He is Allah<sup>3</sup>—there is no god ‘worthy of worship’ except Him: Knower of the seen and unseen. He is the Most Compassionate, Most Merciful.*

*He is Allah—there is no god except Him: The King, the Most Holy, the All-Perfect, the Source of Serenity, the Watcher ‘of all’, the Almighty, the Supreme in Might,<sup>1</sup> the Majestic. Glorified is Allah far above what they associate with Him ‘in worship’!*

*He is Allah: The Creator, the Inventor, the Shaper. He ‘alone’ has the Most Beautiful Names. Whatever is in the heavens and the earth ‘constantly’ glorifies Him. And He is the Almighty, All-Wise.”*

*God, being all of the above and more, presents Himself to man and claims respect and obedience from all His creation, more importantly from man who is to be conscious of Him at all times. Man is the conscious and animate being. Mindfulness of God is what God expects from man as He claims in the following verse: Be mindful of God, for God is the One Who teaches you, And God has perfect knowledge of all things (The Quran 2:282).*

**Who is man? Man as a Khalifa/ vicegerent of God  
Nursi expounds the Quranic description of man**

Being a *khalifa* or vicegerent of God (The Quran: 2), the human being is described as the most comprehensive being created by God. This is man’s nature. This description of man is expounded in the Risale-i Nur

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<sup>3</sup> Allah (in Arabic) means God.



(Nursi & Vahide, 1995; Nursi, 2005). Man, who is composed of a physical body, a soul<sup>4</sup> or ego, a mind, and a spirit, is the fruit of the universe. This is man's inherent condition, comprising such comprehensiveness, which translates into the physical, rational, emotional, intellectual and spiritual abilities respectively. A physical or chemical analysis of man's composition would reveal the presence of the periodic table in man's body, confirming man as the fruit of the universe.

Scientifically, in his physicality, man, being a mammal/animal enjoys characteristics of animals, to which one may ascribe basic instincts. However, animals are inherently physical animate creatures of God, who continuously and naturally extol God. They are considered workers of God<sup>5</sup>. So, when God says in the verses in At-Tin (Quran: 95), that man can drop to a level "lower than animal", then what is meant is what Said Nursi explains in his 23<sup>rd</sup> word, that, since man is gifted with such comprehensiveness as explained earlier, while being the chosen custodian, the '*Khalifa*' of God on earth (The Quran: 2), his responsibilities are significant and multiple. When man fails to fulfil his duties, not complying with God's laws, then, he clearly falls to the level of an animal, even below, simply implying that he is not using his God-given intelligence and consciousness effectively.

The responsibilities of the human are established from the moment of creation of prophet Adam. When at creation, prophet Adam was taught 'Names', as mentioned in "He taught Adam the names of all things" (The Quran, Al-Baqarah 2:31), it is referring to an index of all types of knowledge, from sciences to philosophies, in whatever proportion God allows and wills man to have, at a given time in the human timeline. With knowledge given to man, though obviously limited as per God's will, especially compared to God's own knowledge (God is *Al-'Aleem*/The All-Knowing), man is thus endowed with great responsibility in this world. Man, as the most intelligent creation of God, with a mind to manage God-given knowledge, he is being given the Trust, the big responsibility.

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<sup>4</sup> Soul and spirit are regarded as two different entities according to the Risale-i Nur – based on knowledge from scholars. Soul is more likened to the inner voice or ego, which can steer one to the good or to the bad. Listening to the inner voice can either take man to the highest potential (best of stature-angelic level) or drop to a level lower than animal (Man as an animal can be worse than animals - animals are beings that are workers of God, they worship Him naturally while serving the purpose for which they are created).

<sup>5</sup> In the Twenty-fourth word, Fourth branch Nursi expounds the categories of workers of God – from Angels, through plants and animals, to inanimate beings, to man.

In *surah* Al Ahzab (The Quran:33), God says that the Trust was offered, in the unseen, to the Mountains and the Heavens but they did not accept this big responsibility for fear of disappointing God. Man is mentioned as taking this responsibility.

*“Indeed, We offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, and they declined to bear it and feared it; but man [undertook to] bear it. Indeed, he was unjust and ignorant (The Quran:33:72)*

This Trust is key in understanding the significance of man and his mammoth responsibility vis-à-vis God, during his stay in the realm of this world. Man is responsible for ensuring that all obligations are kept with utmost obedience to God.

The Trust is mentioned in this discussion as it is linked to the value that God ascribes to man, since creation.

### **Corpus presentation**

**Contrasting the inherent condition of man in *surah* At-Tin “The Fig” with the condition of man in *surah* Al ‘Asr “The Time”.**

The following is underpinned by the above section. God is the All-Wise One and He had His reasons for describing the human being in such ways in these verses.

Man being in a state of loss implies firstly, that man loses a lot of time and is idle with regard to what God expects of him. He stalls. Secondly, being in a ‘state of loss’, implies that man is either a loser or has lost, that is, he has not gained or profited with regard to his potential. He has not achieved his full potential.

The discussion, based on Nursi’s exegesis, is about the relevance of these verses in today’s context, focussing on man and society as a whole. Before the discussion on human condition, God’s creation, man, is described and presented from His perspective, from The Designer’s/ The Creator’s perspective as elaborated in the Quran.

Human condition according to God is presented in *surah* Al ‘Asr (The Time) as mentioned earlier. Aspects of man from *surah* At-Tin (The Fig) are also emphasised as they are essential to this discussion.

(The Quran: 103 Al ‘Asr “The Time”)

By time, Indeed, mankind is in loss, Except for those who have believed and done righteous deeds and advised each other to truth and advised each other to patience.

In this *surah*, God says that mankind is in a state of loss; except for those who are characterised by four qualities, namely, faith; righteous deeds; advising each other about Truth; and advising each other to patience. This is interpreted as the only path to salvation in this world, as well as in the next world. The prescription of God in the Quran comprises these four elements which relate to man's own personal development and ease, and the other two relate to other people's guidance and reform. This is the thought of a 14<sup>th</sup> century exegete, Ibn Kathir.

### **Relationship between 'Time' and 'Human Loss'**

Commentators such as Ibn Kathir (2000) as well as Nursi (Nursi & Vahide, 1995) have observed that all aspects of man, from his growth and development throughout his life, operate along a timeline, which is limited. As the saying goes: 'Time flies.' Therefore, man's capital of existence reduces with the passage of time. How does man occupy himself on this timeline is what matters, from God's perspective, according to His words in these verses?

Years, months, days, and hours of life pass very fast, yet man's God-given physical, mental, and spiritual attributes as well as potentialities keep declining, exponentially at times. This decline implies that man can no longer perform his assigned duties of worship and obedience with the passage of time; meaning that he cannot uphold the Trust given by God. God has granted man the invaluable capital of life, so that he may invest it in profitable trade. If man invests his capital of life sensibly in good deeds, he will make a lot of profit which he will enjoy in the Hereafter. However, if he wastes his life in serving his ego, doing evil acts, and sinning, then, he will not only lose his time in life, he will also be losing the profit in the next world.

When man wakes up each morning, it is primarily to worship God before he starts to prepare to seek his livelihood, all in obedience to God. This is corroborated by *Hadith*/ prophetic traditions. Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

"When a person wakes up in the morning, he invests his soul or life in a business enterprise: some of the investors free or save the capital from loss and others destroy it."

In the Quran, God mentions the word "trade" to refer to belief and good deed which would then translate into reward in the Hereafter, thus:

*"...shall I tell you about a trade that saves you from a painful punishment?" (The Quran: As Saf 61:10)*

'Time is money' as perceived in a materialistic context, in this world. However, in light of the verses discussed here, time represents either the wise opportunities of investment for the Hereafter or the missed ones, for the human, that would lead to loss.

The human has a limited and transient lifetime of opportunities to capitalise for the Hereafter. His condition on this earth is predetermined but since he is endowed with free will, he is responsible for his acts. Moreover, the concept of time is also a witness to the growth and decline of society as a whole. The human condition discussion is not individual and personal but it is also a societal and universal one. Historical events and current affairs are testimony to such observations.

Time has a bearing, not only on the physical and physiological status of man but also on his intellectual, moral, and spiritual development. As man grows old, he slows down, which is a decline, and this is common knowledge and unavoidable.

Taken to another level, this fact of decline is worrying, as it means that man loses his chance to perform his duties towards His God. While man is to remain committed to his Creator at all times, as God never fails to sustain him, man is weakened with time. Even the believing man cannot fulfill his duties as he used to during his youth. Ironically man wants to be immortal and at least preserve his youth. Man is known to dread old age.

Therefore, it is inferred that youth and time are correlated. How man uses his or her youth productively to achieve the potential set for him or her by God, as per the verses of *surah* At-Tin which is key in this discussion. Reference is made here to verse 4 of *surah* At-Tin.

*"Indeed, We have created man on the most excellent of patterns..."*  
*(The Quran: 95),*

This verse clearly shows man as having been created and moulded in an excellent fashion which makes him responsible for his actions. If he is at a loss, he has only himself to blame.

With regard to the rest of the *surah* Al 'Asr, man as a social being is at the centre of the last verses. Society thrives on mutual assistance and guidance. ["Advising each other for truth"] and ["advising each other for patience"] are principles of cooperation and solidarity.

Truth and patience are the two concepts that are key to these verses. These two concepts may be explained in terms of the following. 'Truth' may refer to identifying and acknowledging the true God and building a relationship with Him, hence having true faith and practising good deeds.

The "Truth" could also mean the true principles of the belief system, namely the articles of faith in Islam<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting here that one of the attributes and beautiful Names of God is 'Haqq', meaning 'The True One'. With the mention of 'patience' here, evidently God advises man to be patient and to trust Him. He advises man to be forbearing. By obeying Him, man would make his own life better. Man would be keeping away from sins by restraining himself. Abstinence from the forbidden is also a sign of patience. Moreover, man is to face adversity without complaining. This is another way he can show patience.

As Said Nursi mentions in 'The Words' from The Risale-i Nur collection, man the believer, can "be saved from the pressure of events in accordance with the strength of his belief" (Nursi & Vahide, 1995: 322). This is linked to patience. His condition is thus dependent on his actions, including his conscious decision to lead his life according to God's set standards. The first verse of Al 'Asr can also be interpreted by exegetes as man being essentially a loser, unless or until he stays on the guided straight path.

Besides doing good deeds as an individual, man should advise others strongly and effectively to submit to God and behave, which translates to man's social responsibility. All these wise pieces of advice in

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<sup>6</sup> Islam literally means 'submission to God'. The six articles of faith in Islam: 1. Belief in the existence and oneness of God. 2. Belief in the existence of angels. 3. Belief in the existence of the previous revelations/books of which God is the Author: The Quran (revealed to Muhammad), the Gospel (revealed to Jesus), the Torah (revealed to Moses), Psalms (revealed to David) 4. Belief in the existence of prophets: Muhammad being the last of them, Jesus the penultimate, and others sent before them. 5. Belief in the Day of Judgment 6. Belief in the existence of God's predestination 'Divine Decree' due to God's omniscience, whether it is good or bad.

this *surah* thus help in the creation of a healthy and moral society. Man would be in an immaculate condition and so would society.

The verses below clearly position man as God created him.  
(The Quran: 95 At-Tin "The Fig" :4-6)

*In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.  
Indeed, We have created man on the most excellent of patterns, Then sent him down to the lowest of the low, Except those who believe and do good deeds.*

In *surah* At-Tin above, besides the discussion of man as being the best created being by The Creator, further to the nature of man, the rewards and punishments in the Hereafter are discussed in this *surah*.

The first few verses give the context of greatest men of God – Prophets. God takes an oath by the regions of these Prophets of God. The land of the olive and the fig is mentioned which is reminiscent of Jerusalem, the land where many Prophets of God have walked, including Jesus. Mount Sinai is mentioned too, which is where Moses was. Then God mentions the city of Muhammad, Mecca.

As stated above, the verses mentioned above (4-6) state that God has created man in the best of stature, or most excellent of patterns. At other places in the Quran, this truth has been expressed in different ways. For example, as stated above at other locations in the Quran, "*Allah appointed man His vicegerent on the earth and commanded the angels to bow down to him (Al-Baqarah: 30,34, Al-An'am: 165, Al-Araf: 11, Al-Hijr 28,29, An-Naml: 62, Sad 71- 73)*".

At other places, God says, "We honoured the children of Adam and exalted them above many of Our other creatures (Bani Israil, 70)," here, the statement referring to the residences of the Prophets (verses 1-3) indicate that man, having been created in the best of stature, implies that it is from mankind that blessed beings capable of attaining to the highest position of Prophethood are found. This is a position which has not been attained by any other creature of God. This reflection is key in understanding why man owes God his service.

Man is presented in *surah* At Tin in his comprehensiveness as a potential angel or a being lower than animal, as mentioned earlier. These verses are analysed in light of man's comprehensive nature and his behaviour as an individual or as a collective.

So what does it mean, that man is made in “the best of stature” that is higher than angel, yet he also has the potential to drop lower than animal. By the latter, man becomes slave to his carnal desires and becomes worse than animal. Animals themselves are created as servants and workers of God and are subjugated to man, serving man as a loyal pet or friend, as company, as means of transport, as instrument and assistant in agriculture, and they serve more purposes.

Adhering to man’s description in the Quran, Said Nursi (Nursi & Vahide, 1995) expounds the characteristics of man in his first point of the twenty-third word, as aligned with the Quran, in this way:

Through the light of belief, man rises to the highest of the high and acquires a value worthy of Paradise. And through the darkness of unbelief, he descends to the lowest of the low and falls to a position fit for Hell. For belief connects man to the All-Glorious Maker; it is a relation. Thus, man acquires value by virtue of the Divine art and inscriptions of the dominical Names which become apparent in him through belief. Unbelief severs the relation, and due to that severance the dominical art is concealed. His value then is only in respect to the matter of his physical being. And since this matter has only a transitory, passing, temporary animal life, its value is virtually nothing (319).

As mentioned earlier, the story of man starts at the creation of Adam (The Quran: Al-Baqarah 2) when all angels are asked to prostrate before him. This mere event in the unseen shows how important man is to God. He is the only one who has been given enough intelligence to choose right from wrong. He was sent prophets and revelations as guides but at times he allows himself to be misguided by following his ego. God created man to worship Him primarily. While everything in the heavens and the earth extol Him (The Quran Al-Isra 17:44), man is ordered to worship God. This is man’s unequivocal first responsibility.

There are two kinds of men. those who in spite of having been created in the most excellent of patterns or the “best of stature” (The Quran: At-Tin:95) according to another translation become inclined to evil and moral degeneration causes them to be reduced to a level “lower than animal”. Those who by adopting the way of faith and righteousness remain safe from degeneration and progress, consistently living up to the standard of “excellent of patterns”. The existence among mankind of the two kinds of men constitutes a fact which no one can deny, for everyone can observe and experience it in society everywhere, continuously.

In summary, the human being whom God has designed to the best of stature is expected to enjoin good and forbid evil. In doing so, he proves that he has earned the status of “best of stature”.

### **Corpus analysis and interpretation**

In this section, the above interpretation is further explored as a translation into principles to guide man’s life and as an application to the practices of man, either in his personal capacity or as a collective. The literature review above also ties in with the following section which is self-explanatory in terms of the obvious daily, possibly challenging situations in which man may find himself. These situations help define man’s condition as a human being. Below is a discussion of how man faces challenges.

### **Personal life of man**

It is well documented as per the literature review presented herein and daily reports on mainstream media that man finds himself in personal situations of distress where he is challenged either physically, mentally, or socially. All adverse incidents in man’s life are considered setbacks, causing frustration, hopelessness and despair in man, unless he is a believer who endures the situation with patience and resilience.

Physically, man will face adversity; diseases and discomfort will leave him weak. How he navigates his way around these situations will testify to his stamina, to his will to fight with patience. However, man needs to realise that he can only ‘do so much’. His capacity is limited. His ability is not dependent on himself. He is a contingent being. He relies on the ‘Necessary Being’. He is submitted to God’s will. He can only overcome illness if God allows him to.

The world sees diseases and pandemics recurring and at times God does not allow knowledge enough for the scientists in the field to find a cure. God maintains the control over the human condition.

Covid-19<sup>7</sup> was a recent example of such a disaster that caused man to feel desolate and hopeless, possibly leading to mental issues such as

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<sup>7</sup> COVID-19 was a pandemic that affected the world from 2019 and it is ongoing, yet reduced.



depression. The human is further incapacitated in adverse conditions. The Mayo clinic webpage explains the state of man during Covid-19.

In surveys, the most common symptoms reported were trouble sleeping and feeling anxiety or nervous. The number of people noting those symptoms went up and down in surveys over time. Depression and loneliness were less common than nervousness or sleep problems, but more consistent across surveys over time. Among adults, use of drugs, alcohol and other intoxicating substances has increased over time as well. The first step is to notice how often you feel helpless, sad, angry, irritable, hopeless, anxious or afraid. Some people may feel numb. (Mayo clinic)

In light of *surah Al 'Asr*, patience is commanded by The Creator of man and therefore man finds himself being expected to be patient in all adversity. Man was to be patient during that period of challenges during Covid-19, or during any period of diseases or pandemics. Those with strong faith had a different take on the pandemic that Covid-19 represented (Upenieks & Ellison, 2022). They were patient and understood that there was a wisdom behind it and that God was in control as He had willed it. God promises rewards to those who endure.

The condition of man was challenged during Covid-19 and it is challenged daily in life. Man is affected when his social structure is also challenged. Man is concerned when his close ones and his environment face challenges.

### **Human condition in light of man's social life in his many roles**

Man as a social being is expected to look after his close ones, his family, relatives, neighbourhood, workplace, society, country, and the environment. Man has a responsibility to seek and secure his livelihood and to manage aspects of the spaces in which he operates. As long as man is conscious that his capacity is limited and that he depends on a Higher Being, God, to guide him in his navigation, he will manage with patience and resilience his affairs with the wisdom given by God.

Alternatively, without a practice of patience, in cases and times he is tested by God, man could also renounce everything and become hopeless and desolate. Social issues that affect the human condition daily are evident everywhere in this world. Rebellion, war, envy, competition, profiteering, racketeering, drugs, alcoholism, among many other practices that cause discord in society affect the human condition unequivocally. However,

man, the believer, who trusts God, would still find the strength to vanquish such incidents and challenges in life.

### **Man and the environment**

Man has been blamed for the state of the environment resulting in the phenomenon of climate change or global warming. Man has been blamed for the phenomenon of global warming due to him being responsible for emissions of destructive gases into the air among other nefarious activities, according to the theory that man is the reason for global warming. In his exegesis, Nursi emphasises that only God is in control of the environment, as stated earlier when discussing the names and attributes of God. God is competent over everything. Nursi explains across his literature that God is The One who shows to humans what resurrection is by bringing dead trees back to life during spring. The One who controls everything, surely, is in control of global warming. Man may have had the responsibility of managing his basic action of green awareness and activities. However, is not man's ability limited?

In light of the condition of man in the environmental context, if he considers himself responsible or if society, as a whole, blames him, man is faced with challenges of distress and hopelessness. The impact of climate change on the psyche of man is of significance as man feels threatened that his abode, the earth will end. The feeling of uncertainty and the contingency of the phenomenon of global warming, together with a lack of faith in God render man weak, yet again. He is not patient and feels vulnerable. Doherty and Clayton describe three classes of psychological impacts of climate change on the human: direct effects of extreme weather phenomena; indirect impacts in terms of threats and concerns or uncertainty about the future; and psychosocial (e.g. chronic social and community effects of heat, drought, migrations, and climate-related conflicts, and post-disaster adjustment). Responses include providing psychological interventions in the wake of acute impacts (Doherty & Clayton, 2011). Man needs interventions and seeks immediate gratification of it. However, only God can decide when relief is to come. Man is advised to patience as per chapter Al 'Asr.

### **Man is responsible for his own condition, how?**

Man has a choice. He can choose to believe in God or not. When he is a believer, he is asked by God to be mindful of Him, to be God-conscious, which God states in the Quran is what the purpose of man is on this earth.

Belief informs the life of man. Despite being created with potential – we are limited. The Quran presents man as a mere servant of God. Does man accept that in our era? Risale-i Nur depicts man, who is not a believer as an ego worshipper, like a thieving usurping animal which devours God's provision to satisfy his appetite.

As Nursi explains in his treatise, if man, the scientist who makes a discovery feels entitled and believes he has power, then he should rethink his stance. He is only endowed with knowledge - a partial knowledge – and only if God wills it. He is, thus, indebted to God for all favours and bounties bestowed on him and should lose his arrogance which is presented below as characteristic of the typical man. Nursi literally states that man is like a thief who is ungrateful to God.

### **Self-perception of man's life by himself.**

The discussion continues with further thoughts from Risale-I Nur, which presents man exactly as he is presented in the Quran. As observed in society, man – the typical man - who does not believe; man, the individual and as a member of a collective, has a strong ego. He believes himself to be able to manage his life by himself. Man, who is known to deny God, thinks he has power and strength. He forgets that he is contingent, hence he is impotent, poor, and weak. His body has limited faculties, his mind has limits and his emotions are weak and render him vulnerable (Nursi & Vahide, 1995; Nursi, 2005).

He is attached to this earth and enjoys himself to such an extent that he cannot imagine a life without this world. He wishes he were immortal. He allows himself to indulge in anything that attracts him, without reservation. He uses and abuses everything given to him in this world. He denies that it is His Sustainer, God, who allows him bounties. From the oxygen man breathes, to the good bacterium in his body, man owes God his life and his sustenance.

More can be discussed on the value that man ascribes to himself, however, only a succinct discussion of this topic can be done here. Man is

labelled as a weak, poor, impotent, and contingent creation of God, who depends entirely on his Creator. With this establishment of man as a weakling, Said Nursi contributes to the discussion that man, as a weak creature is indeed at a loss.

### **Man's condition today**

A glance at the behaviour of man in today's world confirms the explanation of the verses in *surah Al 'Asr* (103). Man is not only at a loss, he also feels lost and desperate. Man, however, at times does present himself as being of "the best of stature" through his good and appropriate behaviour (At- Tin, 95)

The human condition is thus assessed in light of the verses discussed above in the context of life on earth for individuals and society. Man and society are exactly as described above in the chosen verses.

All the psychological trauma that man goes through as discussed in the literature review, testifies to man's weak disposition. The latter can be witnessed arguably in all spheres of life. However; man does claim he is powerful at times. This is part of man's loss, when he refuses to submit to God.

### **Evaluation and concluding thoughts**

How lost is the human in this world today? This question can be answered by a simple look at what is going on in the world today in all spheres of life, in all man's conditions, be it in his personal life, in his social life, and in all other spheres where he operates based on his comprehensiveness.

All these spheres where the human operates can be sub-divided and analysed in much more depth to clarify the claim made in this article. Due to the scope of this paper, only a tenuous presentation is possible.

A reflection is invited on the following extracts from 'The Words' from *Risale-i Nur* (12<sup>th</sup> Word; repeated in 25<sup>th</sup> Word) which evidently depicts the situation in the world today. Rampant ideologies such as atheism, materialism, capitalism, egoism, etc. influence mankind. It is only belief in a Higher Being, who is in full control, faith in such a Being, patience in dealing with whatever befalls one, among other good deeds,

that will allow man to achieve the level of 'ahsani taqweem' / "the best of stature" (Quran:95); otherwise, man is in a state of loss (Quran:103).

*By reason of its philosophy, present-day civilisation accepts 'force' as the point of support in the life of society. It takes as its aim 'benefits,' and considers the principle of its life to be 'conflict.' It considers the bond between communities to be 'racialism and negative nationalism.' While its aim is to provide 'amusements' for gratifying the appetites of the soul and increasing man's needs. However, the mark of force is aggression. And since the benefits are insufficient to meet all needs, their mark is that everyone tussles and jostles over them. The mark of conflict is contention, and the mark of racialism, aggression, since it thrives on devouring others. Thus, it is because of these principles of civilization that despite all its virtues, it has provided a sort of superficial happiness for only twenty per cent of mankind and cast eighty per cent into distress and poverty. And as for the truth, its mark is concord, the mark of virtue is mutual support, and the mark of mutual assistance, hastening to help one another. The mark of religion is brotherhood and attraction. And the result of reining in and tethering the evil-commanding soul and leaving the spirit free and urging it towards perfection is happiness in this world and the next. Thus, despite the virtues present-day civilization has acquired from the guidance of the Qur'an in particular, and from the preceding revealed religions, in point of fact it has thus suffered defeat before the Qur'an (Nursi & Vahide, 1995, 420).*

As explained earlier, the human is granted special value by God and all creatures (from the sun to the atom or bacterium) are subjugated to man. Man, having been given the responsibility to be the vicegerent in this world, has a number of responsibilities in this world until he is returned to His Creator (The Quran: Yaseen:36:83). In light of man being in loss, as per the theme of this discussion, one can easily witness daily, the condition of man as it degenerates with time and through action from man. The whimsical man causes his own downfall when he allows his ego to take over.

He seeks to satisfy himself. How does the human manage his life, as the one responsible for himself and for his God-given body as well as those and the things entrusted to him?

A sincere evaluation of the above reflections and discussions is that the human being is not to take for granted the bounties that God bestows on him continuously. Since man is a comprehensive being, as discussed earlier, his comprehensiveness renders him special to God. Since he is the fruit of the universe, he has a responsibility towards that universe and most importantly to the Creator of this universe (Nursi & Vahide, 1995; Nursi, 2005).

He is accountable for his acts. When he acts according to what God has prescribed for him, he fulfils the duties of the one made “of the best of stature” (*At- Tin*). However, the moment man ceases to act responsibly, he attracts a series of consequences. He is not to complain if he faces the consequences of his acts. He is reduced to a state “lower than animal” (*At- Tin*) when he ignores God’s laws and follows his own pursuits for his personal gain and ephemeral pleasure. He is also arrogant when he thinks he can manage his life as he wishes. God tests him, until he realises his weakness and he submits to God. This is the cycle of man’s life. He is indefinitely dependent on God to sustain him. The least he can do is to show gratitude for already given bounties such as free oxygen and water from the skies, among others.

As described in the *Risale-i Nur*, man is impotent, weak, and poor as his life is not actually his. His frustration, hopelessness, and incompetence in managing his own life cause him to feel like a loser, to be in a state of loss and that is only due to his lack of trust in God. Contingent man has no right to demand rights if he does not respect His Creator’s God’s rights.

When God says that He will test humans, He means it. The onus is on the human to endure as the following verse states.

*“We will certainly test you with a touch of fear and famine and loss of property, life, and crops. Give good news to those who patiently endure”*  
(*The Quran: 2:155*)

The article invites deep reflections on the realisation of who we are, where we come from and where we are going as depicted in the *Quran* and in light of Said Nursi’s *Risale-i Nur* (Nursi & Vahide, 1995; Nursi, 2005). Our submission to the One of power is the only way to improve our condition as human.

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