SAMPLE

Madyan: The People of the Wood

The Story of the People of Shu'ayb (شُعَيْب) in the Quran

Aira Aurora

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Contents

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Introduction

Chapter 1: The People of Madyan — Commerce and Fraud

Chapter 2: Shu'ayb's Preaching — The Call to Justice

Chapter 3: The Response of Madyan — Mockery and Threats

Chapter 4: The Final Warning — The Patience of Shu'ayb

Chapter 5: The Destruction — The Earthquake

Chapter 6: The Aftermath — The Ruins of Trade

Chapter 7: Madyan in the Broader Quranic Narrative

Chapter 8: The Lessons of Madyan

Chapter 9: Madyan and Us — Reflections

Chapter 10: The Method-Verse and the Farewell — The Prophet's Own File

Frequently Asked Questions

Glossary

This free sample contains the Introduction and Chapter 1. The complete book contains the full contents above.

Introduction

The Quran tells the stories of nations — peoples who received prophets, rejected or accepted the message, and were destroyed or saved. The first book in this series covered Qawm Nuh — the first destroyed nation. The second covered Aad — the people of the wind. The third covered Thamud — the people of the rock. The fourth covered Qawm Lut — the people of the rain. This book covers the fifth: Madyan, the people of the wood.

Madyan were a people of commerce. They lived in a region associated with trade routes, markets, and the exchange of goods. The Quran does not describe their architecture as it describes the pillars of Aad or the carved houses of Thamud; instead, it describes their transactions. The sin of Madyan was not idolatry alone, nor sexual innovation, but economic injustice — the sin of giving short measure, cheating in transactions, and defrauding the buyer. The Quran says:

"And do not decrease the measure and the scale with the people. And do not commit mischief on the earth after it has been set in order" (7:85, 11:85).

Allah sent Shu'ayb to Madyan — a man from among them, calling them to worship Allah alone and to conduct their business with justice. His message was unique among the prophets of the destroyed nations: he did not only call for tawhid and the abandonment of a specific sin; he called for economic justice — the reform of the very system that made Madyan prosperous. Shu'ayb's message was that worship and trade are connected: the people who cheat in the market are the people who have forgotten God, and the people who remember God are the people who trade fairly.

Madyan rejected Shu'ayb. They mocked him, called him a liar, and threatened to expel him. The Quran records their response:

"O Shu'ayb, does your prayer command you that we should leave what our fathers worshipped, or not do with our wealth what we please...?" (11:87)

The verse is remarkable — the people of Madyan mocked the connection between prayer and commerce. "Does your prayer command you...?" — the people who separated worship from trade did not understand a prophet who connected them. The question is the rejection: the people who believed religion was a private matter, separate from business, rejected the prophet who said it was not.

The destruction of Madyan came as an earthquake — the ground itself shook and took the nation. The Quran says:

"So the earthquake seized them, and they became motionless in their homes" (7:91, 29:37).

The people who cheated in the scale were destroyed by the ground beneath the scale. The people who gave short measure received a short measure of time — the earthquake took them in a moment. The nation that measured its wealth in transactions was measured by the earth itself, and the earth found them wanting.

The story of Madyan appears in several surahs: Al-A'raf (7), Hud (11), Al- Hijr (15), Ash-Shu'ara (26), Al-Ankabut (29), Sad (38), and Qaf (50). The Quran also refers to them as "Ashab al-Aykah" — the people of the Wood — a name that connects them to a specific location, perhaps a thicket or forested area near their settlement.

This book — Madyan: The People of the Wood — follows the same structure as the previous four: the people before the destruction, the prophet's preaching, the response, the final warning, the destruction, the aftermath, the connections to the broader Quranic narrative, the lessons, and the reflections for the present. The story of Madyan is the story of commerce without conscience — the nation that measured its wealth and forgot the One who measured the earth.

Chapter 1: The People of Madyan — Commerce and Fraud

Madyan were a people of commerce. Their land — associated with the region of northwest Arabia, near the Gulf of Aqaba — sat on trade routes that connected the larger economies of the ancient world. The people of Madyan were merchants, traders, dealers. Their livelihood was the exchange: buying and selling, measuring and weighing, profiting and accumulating. The Quran describes them not by what they built but by how they traded — the identity of Madyan is commercial.

The Quran's focus on Madyan's commerce is significant. The previous destroyed nations were defined by power (Aad), skill (Thamud), or moral corruption (Sodom). Madyan is defined by economics. The nation that measures its worth by its wealth is the nation that is measured by its injustice. The Quran does not condemn commerce itself — commerce is lawful, trade is permitted, profit is allowed. The Quran condemns the corruption of commerce: the cheating, the fraud, the injustice that turns trade into theft.

The specific sin of Madyan was economic fraud. The Quran says:

"And do not decrease the measure and the scale with the people" (7:85, 11:85).

And:

"Give full measure and do not defraud" (26:181-182).

The command is specific: give full measure. The people of Madyan gave short measure — they weighed less than they charged for, measured less than they sold, gave less than they promised. The fraud was the system: the people who controlled the scales controlled the profit, and the people who controlled the profit used the scales to cheat.

The sin of short measure is the sin of dishonesty in the everyday. The previous nations sinned in the grand — idolatry, arrogance, sexual innovation. Madyan sinned in the mundane — the scale, the measure, the transaction. The Quran treats the mundane sin with the same seriousness as the grand sin: the nation that cheats in the market is the nation that is destroyed by the earthquake. The everyday matters to God — the scale in the shop is as important as the idol in the temple.

In addition to short measure, the Quran mentions another sin:

"And do not commit mischief on the earth after it has been set in order" (7:85,

11:85).

The word "mischief" (fasad) means corruption, disorder, the disruption of the right order. The phrase "after it has been set in order" suggests that Allah had established a right order — a moral and social order — and Madyan had disrupted it. The disruption was not merely economic; it was social. The people who cheated in the scale also corrupted the society: the dishonest economy produces a dishonest society, and the dishonest society produces the conditions for destruction.

The "mischief" of Madyan included highway robbery and intimidation — the merchants who controlled the trade routes also controlled the people who traveled them. The economy of Madyan was not merely unfair; it was predatory. The strong exploited the weak, the rich exploited the poor, the merchant exploited the customer. The system of Madyan was a system of organized injustice — and the prophet who was sent to them was sent to call them to justice.

The Quran also refers to Madyan as "Ashab al-Aykah" — the people of the Wood:

"The companions of the thicket denied the messengers" (15:78, 38:13, 50:14).

The word aykah means a thicket, a dense wood, a gathering of trees. The name suggests that the people of Madyan lived near a forested area — perhaps a region of trees that provided shade, timber, or a gathering place. The name "Ashab al-Aykah" is the geographical identifier, the way "Iram" identifies Aad and "Al-Hijr" identifies Thamud.

The "people of the Wood" is also a metaphor. The people who lived among the trees — the trees that Allah grew from the earth, the trees that provided shade and fruit — were the people who forgot the One who grew the trees. The wood that was a blessing became the name of the people who were destroyed. The natural resource that was a gift became the identity of the people who abused the gift. The people of the Wood are the people who had the wood and lost it

— the people who had the blessing and lost it, because they did not honor the One who gave it.

The Quran reveals the social structure of Madyan through the response to Shu'ayb. The leaders of Madyan were the wealthy merchants — the people who controlled the trade and the scales. The Quran says:

"The eminent among his people who were arrogant said: We will surely evict you, O Shu'ayb, and those who have believed with you from our city" (7:88).

The "eminent" who were "arrogant" are the same class as the "eminent" of Aad and Thamud — the elite who rejected the prophet and oppressed the believers. But in Madyan, the elite are specifically the merchant class: the people whose wealth came from trade, and whose trade was built on fraud. The threat to "evict" Shu'ayb is the merchant's weapon — the person who controls the economy controls the people, and the people who control the economy use eviction as their tool.

The social division in Madyan follows the same pattern as the other nations: the elite reject, the common people believe, and the prophet stands between. But in Madyan, the division has an economic dimension: the people who benefit from the fraud reject the call to justice, and the people who suffer from the fraud accept it. The economic interest determines the spiritual position — the merchant who profits from cheating has a vested interest in rejecting the prophet who calls for fairness.

Madyan was the fifth destroyed nation — the fifth in a sequence that began with Qawm Nuh. The first nation had no precedent; the fifth had four. The accumulation of precedent is now overwhelming: the flood, the wind, the thunderbolt, the rain of stones — four destroyed nations, four different means of destruction, four different warnings. The fifth nation had more evidence than any nation before it — and still rejected.

The sin of Madyan is also the most relatable. The people who cheat in the market are not as dramatic as the people who practice sexual innovation, but they are more common. The sin of Madyan is the sin of every market, every economy, every society where the scale is tipped and the measure is short. The fifth nation's destruction is the warning to every nation that follows: the God who destroyed Madyan for cheating in the scale is the God who watches every scale.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aira Aurora is an independent researcher and writer specializing in Quranic studies. Her work focuses on close reading of the Quranic text, exploring its themes, narratives, and moral framework with attention to both the original Arabic and the broader human context.

The NurOne master series is her primary project -- a multi-sub-series exploration of the Quran covering prophets, people, places, events, lessons, commands, signs, the unseen, the hereafter, and everyday life. Each book is a close reading of the Quranic verses on a specific topic, presented in clear, accessible language.

Her work is published under the pen name Aira Aurora.

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