
Imagery Interpretation of Mountain in the Quran: Insights from Different Exegeses

Sobia Shehzadi

PhD Scholar, Allama Iqbal Open University,

Islamabad, Pakistan, Lecturer DBS&H, CEME,

National University of Sciences and Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7121-5673>

Sanaullah Hussain

Associate Professor,

Allama Iqbal Open University,

Islamabad, Pakistan

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3617-7935>

Abstract

The Quranic imagery of mountains is rich and multifaceted, blending vivid artistic metaphors with profound theological and cosmological insights. Various exegeses (tafsir) provide diverse interpretations of the symbolic and literal meanings of mountains as depicted in the Quran, portraying them not merely as natural features but as dynamic elements crucial to Earth's stability and divine order. The Quran describes mountains as "pegs" or "anchors" that prevent the Earth from shaking, an image that classical scholars have explored for its metaphorical implications and that modern commentators reflect upon considering geological knowledge. This dynamic imagery and visual interpretation evoking firmness and stability alongside divine craftsmanship, aligns with themes of spiritual steadfastness and cosmic harmony. Through an exegetical lens, the artistic portrayal of mountains in the Quran emerges as a powerful symbol that connects natural phenomena with moral, spiritual, and eschatological meanings, inspiring reflection on the divine wisdom underlying creation.

Keywords: Quranic imagery, mountains, Earth's stability, artistic, eschatological

1. Introduction

The Holy Quran is a divine book that not only contains guidance, commands, and moral principles, but also contains the highest examples of aesthetics, eloquence, rhetoric, and visual expression in its stylistic structure. An important aspect of this literary greatness of the Quran is its imagery, in which the objects of the universe are described in such a way

that a lively, dynamic scene emerges in the mind of the reader. One of the prominent objects is the mountains, which are mentioned in various ways in the Quran, and especially in the dynamic imagery, their images shake the reader on an intellectual and aesthetic level.

Mountains are considered a symbol of stability, immobility, and solidity in their existence. But in the Quran, they are adorned with functions such as movement, destruction, trembling, flight, and testimony at some places, which highlights their "dynamic" image. This style not only familiarizes the reader with the natural reality of the mountains but also gives them an understanding of the power of Allah, the horror of the Day of Judgment, and the cosmic order.

The Qur'an employs mountains as dynamic and multifaceted symbols, blending physical, metaphysical, and ethical dimensions. Far from being static backdrops, mountains in the Qur'an are depicted as stabilizers of the earth, metaphors for spiritual resilience, and signs of divine wisdom and cosmic balance (mīzān)¹

In this research study, we will examine these dynamic images of mountains mentioned in the Quran and their interpretive explanations. This study will not only highlight the aesthetic aspect of the Quran but also bring to light its scholarly and faith-based implications.

Etymology and meaning of Mountains

The word "mountain" has a rich etymological history rooted in the languages of Europe, reflecting both the physical characteristics and cultural perceptions of elevated landforms. Its origins trace back to Latin and earlier Indo-European roots, often connected to ideas of shape, prominence, and even "baldness" or "sharpness."

Etymological Origins

- **Latin ("montāna"):** Derived from "mons, montis" meaning "mountain" or "hill".
- **Romance Dialects:** Words for "mountain" often referred to shape, rocky or bushy nature, or as borders².
- **Proto-Indo-European:** the etymology often connects to the idea of sharpness or prominence, as seen in the root *H2ek- and its derivatives, which describe both the shape and the rocky nature of mountains³.
- **Baltic/Pre-Romance:** *kalnas ("mountain") and *kaluā ("hill") linked to "bald" or "bare" landforms. The semantic shift from "bald" (bare of vegetation) to "hill" or "mountain" is also documented, showing how physical features influenced naming conventions⁴.

Literal Meaning of "Mountain"

- **Physical Characteristics:** Mountains are rugged, elevated structures in the landscape, often difficult to delineate precisely. They are defined by their height, steepness, and distinct ecological zones, such as those above the natural forest line, with unique climates and soils⁵.
- **Ecological Importance:** Mountains host a high proportion of global biodiversity and provide numerous ecological niches due to their varied terrain and rapidly changing environmental conditions⁶.

Terminological and Conceptual Definitions

- **Scientific Terminology:** The term "mountain" and related concepts (e.g., "high mountains") are used differently across scientific fields. In landscape science, terminology is continually refined to accurately describe features like high-altitude zones, which are defined by specific climatic and ecological criteria⁷.
- **Cross-Linguistic Perspectives:** The core meaning of "mountain" is similar in English and Chinese, referring to a large, elevated landform. However, metaphorical and extended meanings can differ, reflecting both universal and culture-specific perceptions⁸.
- **Challenges in Definition:** There is ongoing debate and evolution in how mountains are defined for scientific, conservation, and policy purposes, as these definitions impact biodiversity assessments and human population studies⁹.

In Arabic Language

The Arabic word for "mountain" is "جبل" (jabal). This term is widely used in Arabic-speaking regions. The word "mountain" in Arabic carries precise meanings both literal (linguistic) and idiomatic (conceptual). Understanding these two aspects helps clarify how the term is used in Arabic language and culture.

The Literal (Linguistic) Meaning of the Word "Mountain"

Basic Definition: "Mountain" literally refers to a large, elevated mass of land, often rocky and protruding from the surrounding surface.

¹⁰**Geographical Definition:** "Jabal" literally refers to a land mass that is elevated and protrudes from the surrounding land surface, often rocky or steep.

Physical Characteristics:

The term is used to denote elevated terrain characterized by height and solidity compared to surrounding areas.

There are several words used for mountain in Arabic, each with its own specific meanings and uses. Below is a description of these words with reliable lexical references:

1. (الْجَبَلُ: plural: الْجِبَالُ)

A high, rocky structure of land that stands out from the surrounding area. Sometimes also used metaphorically for "a major difficulty or problem."

1. Lisān al-‘Arab (Ibn Manẓūr)

"الْجَبَلُ: اسم لكل وتد من أوتاد الأرض إذا عظم وطال من الأعلام والأطواد والشناخيب. وأما ما صغر وانفرد فهو من القنان والقور والأكم. والجمع أجبل وأجبال وجبال"¹¹.

(Al-Jabal is the name of every large and tall peg/stake of the earth such as prominent mountains and high elevations. Smaller isolated elevations have other names. Plurals include أجبل and أجبال.)

2. Al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ (Al Firuzabad)

"الْجَبَلُ: كل وتد من أوتاد الأرض إذا عظم وطال، يعني مرتفع طبيعي عظيم من الأرض، يتجاوز التل أو الربوة، لا يقتصر على صخرة عظيمة واحدة"¹²

(Al-Jabal is every large and tall natural elevation of the earth exceeding a hill or knoll, not just a large rock.)

3. Edward William Lane's Arabic-English Lexicon

Lane defines "جبل" as a high elevation or mountain with derivations indicating firmness and nature¹³

2. (الرَّوْاسِي: plural: الرُّوسِي)

A thing that stabilizes the earth (i.e. a mountain). This word is used in the Quran to refer to the stability of mountains.

1. Tāj al-‘Arūs by al-Zabīdī

"الرَّوْاسِي: الجبال الثابتة التي ترسُّ الأرض فلا تميد"¹⁴.

("The mountains that hold the earth firmly so that it cannot shake.")

2. الراغب الأصفهاني by مفردات ألفاظ القرآن

"الرَّوْاسِي: الجبال الشامخة الثابتة التي ترس الأرض فلا تميد"¹⁵

(The towering, firm mountains that anchor the earth so it does not shake.)

3. (الْأَطْوَارُ/الطُّورَانُ: plural: الطُّورُ)

A particularly sacred or prominent mountain (such as "Mount Sinai"). Sometimes also used for mountains in general.

1. Majma‘ al-Lughah, Al-Mu‘jam al-Wasīṭ

"الطُّورُ: الْجَبَلُ، وَخُصَّ بِهِ جَبَلُ مُوسَى"¹⁶.

("al-Tūr: the mountain, specifically referring to the Mountain of Moses, peace be upon him.")

4. (الرِّبْوَةُ / الرِّبَوَاتُ: plural: الرِّبَوَةُ)

1. Maqayyis Al-Lughah (Ibn Faris)

"الرِّبْوَةُ: ما ارتفع من الأرض."¹⁷

(That part of the land that is elevated.)

5. الصَّخْرَةُ (plural: الصُّخُورُ)

A large stone or rock, sometimes symbolizing a mountain.

1. Al-Ain (Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad)

"الصَّخْرَةُ: الْحَجَرُ الْعَظِيمُ"¹⁸.

(A large stone or rock.)

The Idiomatic (Conceptual) Meaning of the Word "Mountain"

In Science and Ontology: In Arabic ontology, "mountain" is defined as an independent concept within the classification of natural entities, and is linked to other concepts such as "terrain," "heights," and "mountains."¹⁹

In Culture and Language: "Jabal" is used figuratively to denote stability, strength, or grandeur, and appears in proverbs and popular expressions to denote solidity or steadfastness in a situation.

In legislation: The term may be used to define geographical boundaries, protected areas, or in laws relating to the use of mountainous land²⁰.

Terminology development: The process of terminology development in Arabic sometimes relies on literal translation or the generation of new terms when needed, considering semantic accuracy and scientific or cultural context²¹.

Challenges in translation and usage

Polysemy: The meaning of the word "mountain" may vary depending on the context, ranging from a literal geographical meaning to metaphorical or idiomatic meanings²².

Terminology standardization: There are ongoing efforts in Arabic ontology to standardize and standardize the meanings of terms such as "mountain" to facilitate scientific research and multilingual communication²³.

2. Quranic Dynamic Imagery of Mountain

Mountains are mentioned in the Quran as merely not only geographical or geological realities, but are presented in a dynamic, lively, and impressive visual style also. This interpretation and imagery invite man to contemplate both the external beauty and the inner meaning of mountains.

1. The Concept of Mountains being the "Stabilizer" of the Earth

Verses such as,

﴿وَجَعَلْنَا فِي الْأَرْضِ رَوَاسِيَ أَنْ تَمِيدَ بِهِمْ﴾²⁴

(And We placed firm mountains on earth lest it should stay with them)

﴿وَأَلْفَىٰ فِي الْأَرْضِ رَوَاسِيَ أَنْ تَمِيدَ بِكُمْ﴾²⁵

(And He has placed firm mountains on the earth lest it should move away from you)

﴿وَأَلْقَى فِي الْأَرْضِ رَوًى أَنْ تَمِيلَ بَكُمْ﴾²⁶

(And He has placed firm mountains on the earth lest it should move away from you)

﴿وَأَلْجَبَالَ أَوْتَادًا﴾²⁷

(And fixed the mountains like pegs,)

Depicts mountains as pegs or stakes. As schematically illustrated in Figure 1.2.1.

a) **The Role of Mountains in the Stability of the Earth**

Allah Almighty has placed strong mountains in the earth that protect the earth from movement and shaking so that the earth is safe from shaking or tottering.

If there were no mountains, the earth would be restless, and it would not be possible for humans to live. So, we can say that the earth is in a state of constant movement or shaking, and the mountains hold it like an anchor. That is, the scene of a boat that is rocking in the waves of the sea and is held by an anchor.

As Maududi said, "The main benefit of the elevation of mountains on the surface of the earth is that it regulates the rotation and speed of the earth. This benefit of mountains has been highlighted in several places in the Holy Quran."²⁸

Equally Majidi said, "What is meant here is the undulating motion. The negation here is not of the absolute motion of the earth, but of its erratic motion. These mountains are as if they are working to keep the balance of the earth equal, so that it does not tilt to one side."²⁹

Furthermore, Qutb said, "Scholars of the stratigraphy of the earth also acknowledge that if there were no mountains, the Earth's axial rotation would not be in the balance that it is."³⁰

b) **Scientific Aspects and Evidence**

1) **Isostasy:** According to modern science, mountains are deeply rooted in the Earth's "Lithosphere"(As shown in Figure 1.2.2), just like most of the "Iceberg" is underwater, meaning that there are deep roots under the mountains that go many times deeper into the earth than their height. These roots hold the earth's crust firmly and protect the earth from unstable movement or shaking due to earthquakes. These roots of the mountains are embedded in the inner layer of the earth (Mantle). This is called "Isostasy", i.e. a system of balance, where mountains provide a kind of strength and stability to the earth's surface.

2) **Tectonic Plates and the Effect of Mountains:** Mountains moderate the movement of the earth's tectonic plates. When two large tectonic plates collide, mountains form, such as the Himalayas, which

reduce ground motion and earthquakes and keep the Earth's structure stable.³¹(As shown in Figure 1.2.3)

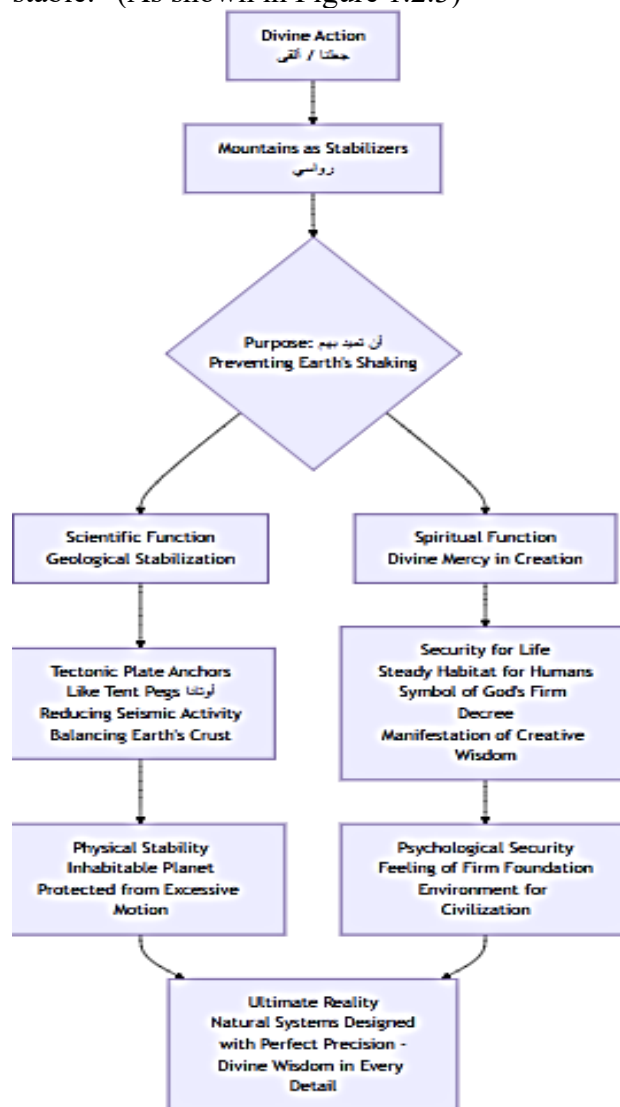


Figure 1.2.1: Surah Al Anbiya 21:31, Surah Al Nahl 16:15, Surah Luqman 31:10 and Surah Naba 78:7

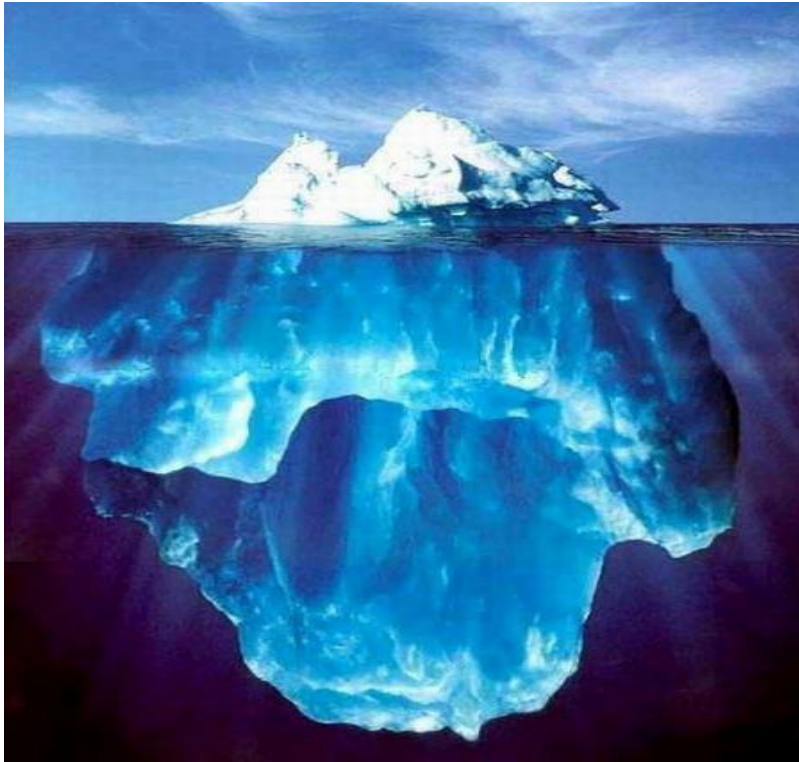


Figure 1.2.2: Lithosphere

<https://medium.com/adventures-in-consumer-technology/tip-of-the-tech-iceberg-e85a9be6b4d8>



Figure 1.2.3: Mountains keep the Earth's structure stable

Source: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/a-truck-driving-down-a-highway-in-the-desert-27681583/>

2. The Movement of Mountains: Traveling like Clouds

Verses such as,

﴿وَنَرَى الْجِبَالَ تَحْسَبُهَا جَامِدَةً وَهِيَ تَمُرُّ مَرَّ السَّحَابِ﴾³²

(You now see the mountains and consider them firmly fixed)

﴿وَنَسِيرُ الْجِبَالُ سَيْرًا﴾³³

(And the mountains shall violently fly about.)

Shows the concept of the movement of mountains presented in the verses are scientifically consistent with the modern scientific facts of the movement of the Earth and the formation of mountains. Ancient commentators mostly considered this verse as a sign of the Day of Judgment, but today the theories of modern science have highlighted its truly universal dynamic nature.

a) Movement of Mountains Despite Their Apparent Stillness

The verse states that to the general eye, mountains appear very solid and immobile, but they move, like clouds flowing across the sky. This shows that mountains appear to be static, but they are also in motion.

As Majidi said, “The mountains, which appear to be completely frozen, are actually moving with the speed of a cloud.”³⁴

b) Movement of Mountains on the Day of Judgment

Most commentators have interpreted this verse as a scene on the Day of Judgment, when mountains will rise from the earth and fly like clouds. Seeing this movement, a person will be surprised and disappointed because what was considered solid and immobile until now will be in flowing motion. As shown in Figure 1.2.5.

As Maududi said, “The earth's grip that holds the mountains in place will loosen, and they will be uprooted and float through the air like clouds.”³⁵

Moreover, Majidi said, “Just as the blowing of the trumpet will be so effective on living things, it will not fail to affect and disrupt inanimate objects as well. Their components will dissolve, and they will continue to be disturbed until they begin to move around unsteadily.”³⁶

c) Scientific Aspects and Explanation

- To the general eye, mountains appear very solid and immobile, but today's modern geology and plate tectonics studies show that the earth's surface and mountains are in constant motion. The Earth's plates (tectonic plates) move under or over each other, causing the formation and evolution of mountains. This movement is very slow, such as a few

millimeters or centimeters per year³⁷. As systematically presented in Figure 3.3.4.

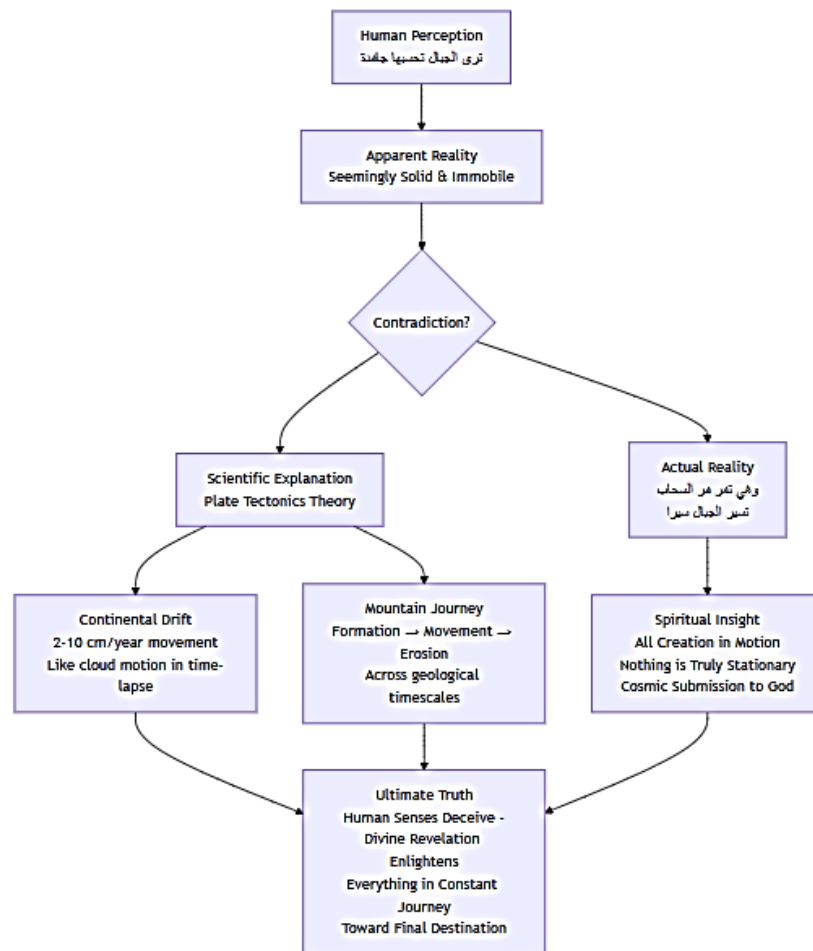


Figure 1.2.4: Surah Naml 27:88 and Surh at Tur 52:10



Figure 1.2.5: Movement of Mountains on the Day of Judgment

Source: <https://lampofislam.wordpress.com/2021/01/29/mountains-are-passing-like-clouds/>

3. The "Star-Like" Spread of Mountains

Verses such as,

﴿وَإِذَا الْجِبَالُ تُسْفَتُ﴾³⁸

(And the mountains are blown away,)

﴿وَكَانَتِ الْجِبَالُ كَثِيرًا مَّهِلًا﴾³⁹

(And the mountains shall crumble into heaps of scattered sand.)

﴿وَبُسَّتِ الْجِبَالُ بَسًّا فَكَانَتْ هَبَاءً مُنْبَثًّا﴾⁴⁰

(And the mountains will crumble and will scatter abroad into fine dust.)

These verses describe the scenes of the Day of Judgment in a very effective and graphic way. The word "تُسْفَتُ" in Arabic refers to the act of breaking something solid and heavy into pieces and blowing it away like dust. It includes the following kinetic and visual aspects:

a) A Scene of Great Destruction

In the Quran, mountains are a symbol of strength, stability, and stability, but on the Day of Judgment, these majestic mountains will be blown away like dust. This scene creates an image in the mind of an explosion or earthquake that uproots mountains from their places and scatters them into the air. As conceptually framed in Figure 1.2.6.

As Maududi said, "Since the attraction that holds the components of the mountains together will disappear at that time, they will first become fine, dense sand dunes, then the earthquake that will be shaking the earth will scatter this sand and the entire earth will become a flat plain."⁴¹

Equally Qutb said, "The horror of that day, this vast earth is also coming under its influence. This earth is shaking, it is breaking into pieces, these humans are very weak and despicable. Great creations will be shattered to pieces."⁴²

b) The Awe of the Apocalypse

This scene heralds the collapse of all the large and stable structures of the universe. The falling of mountains is a sign that the structure of the earth will also undergo a fundamental change, and all of man's material and physical comforts will disappear. As shown in Figure 1.2.7.

As Maududi said, "What manner of fear would this be that the earth should be shaking constantly and that the mountains would shake themselves to pieces and tumble into the sky like dust"⁴³

Same as Qutb said, "What kind of fear would there be that the earth would be constantly shaking and the mountains would crumble and scatter into the sky like particles of dust"⁴⁴

Furthermore, Majidi also said, “In short, at this moment, the entire known and well-known system of the universe will be completely disintegrated. And not a single thing in it will remain in its place. The stars, the sky, the mountains, all these commonsense examples are stable and solid entities.⁴⁵”

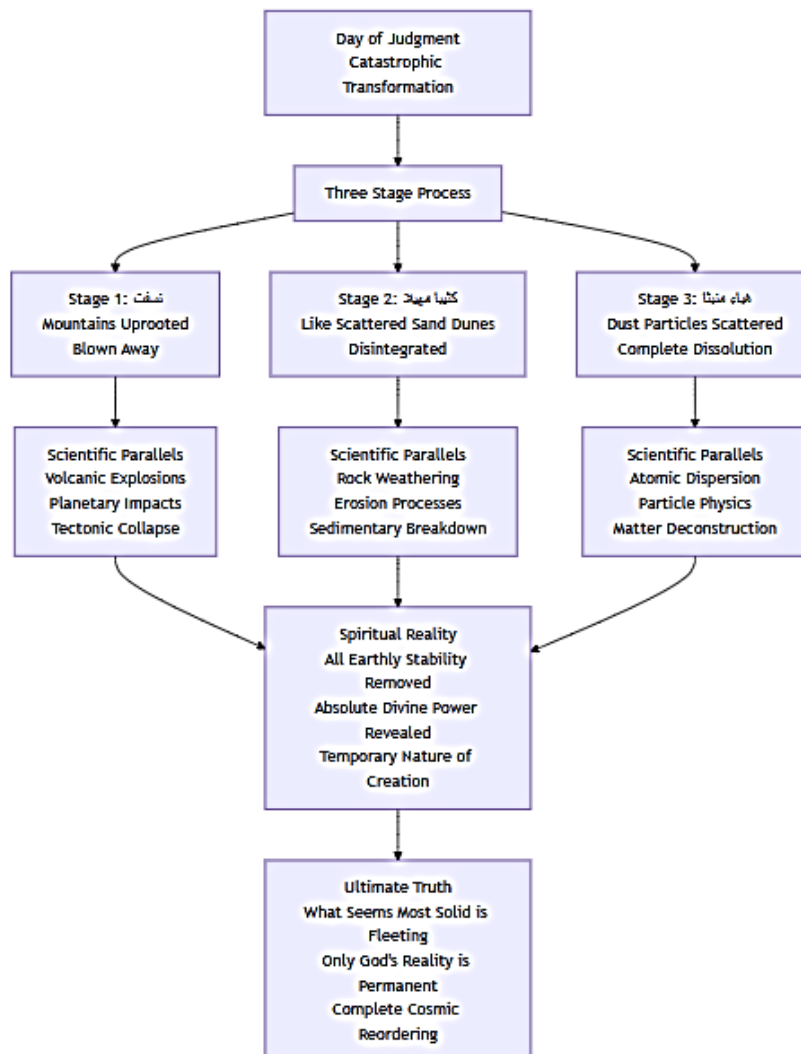


Figure 1.2:6 Surah Al Mursalaat 77:10, Surah Al Muzzammil 73:14 and Surah Waaqia 56:5-6



Figure 1.2.7: The Awe of the Apocalypse

Source: <https://deepdreamgenerator.com/search?t=explore&q=0cf1511b-d7d0-595e-9637-8506a6ed3086&s=results>

4. Mountains as a Symbol of Dialogue and Fear

﴿إِنَّا عَرَضْنَا الْأَمَانَةَ عَلَى السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَالْجِبَالِ فَأَبَيْنَ أَنْ يَحْمِلْنَهَا﴾⁴⁶

(We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to carry it)

a) The Meaning of Trust and Heavy Responsibility

The "trust" in the verse refers to a great and heavy responsibility that Allah Almighty presented to all creatures. This responsibility includes obedience, religious commands, free will, and all aspects of human responsibility, which are very heavy and complex for a creature.

As Maududi said, "'Amanat" means the same "Khilafah" that has been granted to man on earth according to the Holy Quran. Allah Almighty has given man the power and freedom to sin.⁴⁷"

b) The Symbol of the Refusal of the Heavens, Earth, and Mountains

The verse states that this great trust was so heavy that large and stable bodies like the heavens, earth, and mountains refused to carry it.

As Majidi said, "Except for man, the most powerful creatures refused to accept power, will, and authority out of fear of its responsibilities.⁴⁸"

This means that this responsibility was beyond the natural limits of creatures and greater than their strength, because they are not conscious and

chosen creatures, but work under fixed laws and systems. Their refusal is a sign of their weakness or fear.

As Maududi said, “To give an idea of how important and heavy this trust is, Allah Almighty has said that the heavens and the earth, despite all their majesty, and the mountains, despite their immense size and solidity, did not have the strength or courage to bear it (As shown in Figure 1.2.9).⁴⁹”

Furthermore, Qutub said, “This moon and these stars and planets, these winds and these clouds or this water and this sea, these mountains and these plains, all of them perform their duties by the command of their Lord and by the destiny of their Creator, and all these things perform these duties without any effort or labour. These members of the universe could not bear it; they were afraid and cowered. They could not bear this great trust. What was this trust, to perform one's duties with personal will and authority and to be responsible for one's actions and deeds.⁵⁰” As explicitly detailed in Figure 1.2.8.

c) **Quranic Image Element**

There are various interpretations of this verse in the traditions of the commentators, in which trust is seen as obedience, commands, free will, or the duties of prophethood. In a practical sense, this verse refers to the responsibility for the decisions, actions, and deeds of human life, which man accepts but often makes mistakes in.

As Maududi said, “Only by bringing this map before his eyes can a person clearly understand the delicate position he is in in the universe. Now, the person who remains thoughtless in this testing place and has no sense of how great a burden of responsibility he is carrying, and what consequences will result from the right or wrong decisions he makes while choosing an attitude for himself in the life of this world, Allah Almighty is calling him in this verse tyranny and ignorance. He is ignorant, because this fool has considered himself irresponsible. And he is tyranny, because he is preparing for his own destruction and wants to drown who knows how many other people with him.⁵¹”

Furthermore, Qutub said, “From this angle, this weak man took on a great responsibility on his shoulders. Indeed, he was unjust and ignorant. He wronged his own soul by putting this heavy burden on him and he was unaware of his lack of strength. But when man fulfils the responsibility that he has taken on, he directly attains the knowledge of the divine honour, and it works so automatically in the same way that the heavens and the earth and the mountains are easily guided, known and obeyed directly, because all these creatures have directly attained the knowledge of Allah. Nothing prevents them from obeying Allah, so when man, like the entire universe, becomes bound to the knowledge, guidance and obedience of Allah, then he

becomes connected with Allah and his position among Allah's creatures becomes unique.⁵²”

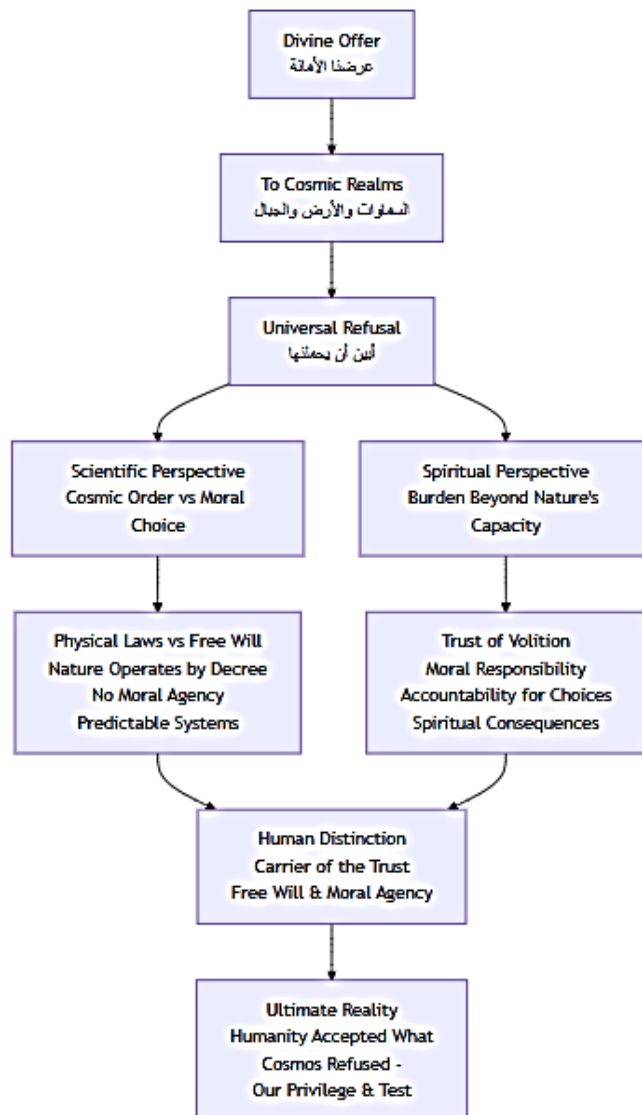


Figure 1.2.8: Surah Ahzab 33:72



Figure 1.2.9: Mountains as a Symbol of Dialogue and Fear

Source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/en/photo/3d-rendering-abstract-unique-fantastic-landscape-of-gap-between-the-rocky-mountains-gm2214559099-631363316>

Conclusion

The concept of mountains in the Quran is not static but dynamic, meaningful and symbolic. In the world, mountains are a symbol of stability and the balance of the earth and on the Day of Judgment, they become a symbol of movement, decline and annihilation. Sometimes they are also presented as conscious characters. Thus, the Quran uses mountains as a visual and dynamic symbol. This scientific research is a witness that mountains move, although they are not visible to the human eye, but modern science has proven this experimentally and observationally. Which reveals not only a geographical reality but also a spiritual message in the mind of the reader. The Quran described facts about mountains 1,400 years ago that were confirmed by modern science today. This "dynamic pictorial interpretation" illustrates the scientific miracle of the Quran.

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