

Zuhayr's Hanging Ode

معلقة زهير بن أبي سلمى

Translation by Moustafa Elqabbany



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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~ Part I: Nostalgic Introduction ~

- | | | | |
|----|--|--|--|
| 1 | Are these mute remnants ¹ of Umm Awfā's ² nights
At Darrāj Pass ³ and Mutathallam Heights ⁴ ? | أَمِنْ أُمَّ أَوْفَى دِمْنَةٌ لَمْ تَكَلِّمْ | بِحَوْمَايَةِ الدَّرَاجِ فَالْمُتَثَلِّمِ؟ |
| 2 | And here's her campsite 'tween two fields ⁵ much like
A wrist tattoo touched up with inky spikes. ⁶ | دِيَارٌ لَهَا بِالرَّفَمَتَيْنِ كَأَنَّهَا | مَرَاجِعُ وَشَمٌّ فِي نَوَاشِرِ مِعْصَمِ |
| 3 | Here wide-eyed antelope and addax scout
Successively as calves leap all about. | بِهَا الْعَيْنُ، وَالْأَرَامُ يَمْشِينَ خِلْفَةً | وَأَطْلَاؤُهَا يَنْهَضْنَ مِنْ كُلِّ مَجْتَمِ |
| 4 | I stood before it after twenty years,
And with due strain, I knew her camp was here: | وَقَفْتُ بِهَا مِنْ بَعْدِ عَشْرِينَ حِجَّةً | فَلَأْيَا عَرَفْتُ الدَّارَ بَعْدَ تَوَهُمِ |
| 5 | Its burnt-red rocks where once a cauldron sat;
Its ditch resembling some preserved old vat. | أَنَّى سُنْفَعًا فِي مَعْرَسِ مِرْجَلِ | وَنُؤْيَا كَجِذْمِ الحَوْضِ لَمْ يَتَنَلِّمْ |
| 6 | And when I recognized her camp, I yelled:
"Good morning, living quarters, and be well!" | فَلَمَّا عَرَفْتُ الدَّارَ قُلْتُ لِرَبْعِهَا: | أَلَا ائْنَعِمَ صَبَاحًا، أَيُّهَا الرَّبْعُ، وَاِسْلَمِ |
| 7 | Look, dear friend! Do you see those ladies there,
High above Jurthum ⁷ , in their howdah chairs? ⁸ | تَبَصَّرْ حَلِيلِي، هَلْ تَرَى مِنْ طَعَائِنِ | تَحْمَلْنَ بِالْعَلْبَاءِ مِنْ فَوْقِ جُرْثُمِ؟ |
| 8 | Qanān ⁹ lies right of them, as do its heights.
Many a friend and foe its land unites. | جَعَلْنَ القَنَانَ عَن يَمِينِ، وَحَزْنُهُ | وَكَم بِالْقَنَانِ مِنْ مُحِلٍّ وَمُحْرَمِ |
| 9 | The ladies draw sheer vintage curtains nigh
Whose reddened hems with dragon's blood are dyed. | وَعَالِبِينَ أَتْهَاتًا عِتَاقًا وَكِلَّةً | وَرَادَ الحَوَاشِي لَوْثُهَا لَوْنٌ عِنْدَمِ |
| 10 | They rise above Sūbān ¹⁰ then cross anew ¹¹
On heavy-duty saddles, strong and new. ¹² | ظَهَرْنَ مِنَ السُّوبَانِ، ثُمَّ جَزَعْنَهُ | عَلَى كُلِّ قَيْنِي قَشِيْبٍ وَمُفَامِ |
| 11 | They sway along Sūbān and climb plateaus
With airs of pampered coquetry bestowed. | وَوَرَّكْنَ فِي السُّوبَانِ يَعْطُونَ مَتْنَهُ | عَلَيْهِنَّ دُلُّ النَّاعِمِ الْمُتَنَعِمِ |
| 12 | Their dyed, wool hems at every campsite are
Like gooseberries, unbroken and unscarred ¹³ . | كَأَنَّ قُتَاتِ الْعُهْنِ فِي كُلِّ مَنْزِلِ | نَزَلْنَ بِهِ حَبُّ الْفَنَاءِ لَمْ يُحَطِّمْ |
| 13 | They set out early, and before dawn stand,
Reaching Rass Valley like mouths fed by hand. ¹⁴ | بَكَرْنَ بُكُورًا، وَاسْتَحَرْنَ بِسُحْرِهِ | فَهُنَّ وَوَادِي الرَّسِّ كَالْيَدِ لِلْقَمِ |
| 14 | And when they reach its water, deep and clear
They pitch their sedentary tent stakes near. | فَلَمَّا وَرَدْنَ المَاءَ زُرُقًا جَمَامُهُ | وَضَعْنَ عِصِيَّ الحَاضِرِ الْمُتَحَيِّمِ |
| 15 | In them, a gentleman finds great delight—
A pleasing scene to each beholder's sight. | وَفِيهِنَّ مَلْهُى لِلطَّيْفِ، وَمَنْظَرٌ | أَنِيقٌ لِعَيْنِ النَّاطِرِ الْمُتَوَسِّمِ |

~ Part II: Praising the Peacemakers ~

- 16 Both sons of Ghayz bin Murrah¹⁵ strove to thwart
The bloodshed that had torn their tribe apart.
- 17 I swear by that House¹⁶ circuted by men
From Jurhum¹⁷ and Quraysh who'd built it then:
- 18 How excellent your presence, O two lords¹⁸
In every easy state and states abhorred!
- 19 You saved Dhubyān and 'Abs¹⁹ from their descent
Into a slaughter sealed by Mansham's scent²⁰.
- 20 You said: "If we attain a vast, safe peace"
"With wealth and words of kindness, harm will cease."
- 21 So you emerged from war, affairs set right,
Far from unruliness and sins and fights.
- 22 Twain greats, you head Ma'add²¹! May God guide you!
For glory's treasure grants the great their due!
- 23 Old wealth of yours—indemnity's dear price:
Great gains and camel foals with ears all spliced.²²
- 24 The injuries would disappear as they
Who had no sin would slowly hundreds pay²³.
- 25 In fines, they paid installments though no blood
Was spilled by them, nay not a cupper's²⁴ crud!
- 26 Alas! Inform Dhubyān and all its foes
On my behalf: "You've sworn to peace, you know."
- 27 Do not conceal what's in your breasts from God,
So as to hide, for God sees through facades—
- 28 Deferred, inscribed in scrolls of deeds, delayed
Till Judgment Day, or hastened and forayed.
- 29 For war is naught but what you've seen and tried,
And this is not mere empty, vain surmise.
- 30 For when you send it forth, it's full of blame,
And when you goad it on, it burns aflame.

- ١٦ سَعَى سَاعِيَا عَيْظِ بْنِ مُرَّةٍ بَعْدَمَا
تَبَزَّلَ مَا بَيْنَ الْعَثِيرَةِ بِالْذِّمِّ
- ١٧ فَأَقْسَمْتُ بِالْبَيْتِ الَّذِي طَافَ حَوْلَهُ
رِجَالُ بَنُوهِ مِنْ قُرَيْشٍ وَجُرْهُمِ
- ١٨ يَوِينًا لِنَعْمِ السَّيِّدَانِ وَجِدْتُمَا
عَلَى كُلِّ حَالٍ مِنْ سَجِيلٍ وَمُبْرَمِ
- ١٩ تَدَارَكْتُمَا عَبَسًا وَذُبْيَانَ بَعْدَمَا
تَفَانَوْا، وَدَقُّوا بَيْنَهُمْ عَطْرَ مَنْشَمِ
- ٢٠ وَقَدْ قُلْتُمَا: إِنْ نُدْرِكِ السَّلْمَ وَإِسْعَا
بِيَالٍ وَمَعْرُوفٍ مِنَ الْقَوْلِ تَسْلَمِ
- ٢١ فَأَصْبَحْتُمَا مِنْهَا عَلَى خَيْرِ مَوْطِنٍ
بَعِيدَيْنِ فِيهَا مِنْ عُقُوقٍ وَمَأْتَمِ
- ٢٢ عَظِيمَيْنِ فِي عَلِيَا مَعَدٍّ، هُدَيْتُمَا
وَمَنْ يَسْتَسِحُّ كَنْزًا مِنَ الْمَجْدِ يَعْظُمِ
- ٢٣ وَأَصْبَحَ يُجْدَى فِيهِمُومٍ مِنْ تِلَادِكُمْ
مَغَايِمُ شَتَى مِنْ إِفَالٍ مُزْتَمِ
- ٢٤ تُعْفَى الْكَلُومُ بِالْمِثْنِ، فَأَصْبَحَتْ
يُنَجِّمُهَا مَنْ لَيْسَ فِيهَا بِمُجْرِمِ
- ٢٥ يُنَجِّمُهَا قَوْمٌ لِقَوْمٍ غَرَامَةٌ
وَلَمْ يُهْرَيْقُوا بَيْنَهُمْ مِلءَ حُجَمِ
- ٢٦ أَلَا أَلْبِغِ الْأَخْلَافَ عَنِّي رِسَالَةً
وَذُبْيَانَ: هَلْ أَقْسَمْتُمُوكُلَّ مُقْسَمِ؟
- ٢٧ فَلَا تَكْتُمُنَّ اللَّهَ مَا فِي صُدُورِكُمْ
لِيَخْفَى، وَمَهْمَا يُكْتَمِ اللَّهُ يَعْلَمِ
- ٢٨ يُؤَخَّرُ، فَيُوضَعُ فِي كِتَابٍ فَيُدْخَرُ
لِيَوْمِ الْحِسَابِ! أَوْ يُعَجَّلُ فَيَنْقَمِ
- ٢٩ وَمَا الْحَرْبُ إِلَّا مَا عَلِمْتُمْ وَدَقَّمْتُمْ
وَمَا هُوَ عَنْهَا بِالْحَدِيثِ الْمُرْجَمِ
- ٣٠ مَتَى تَبْعْتُمُوهَا تَبْعْتُمُوهَا ذَمِيمَةً
وَتَضُرُّ إِذَا ضَرَّيْتُمُوهَا فَتَضُرَّمِ

31 It grinds you like a millstone's flour skin²⁵.
Its frequent offspring are but fragile twins²⁶.

32 It bears you bad sons, all of whom are mean—
Like Ahmar, from 'Ad²⁷—nursed by war and weaned.

33 It brings you yields that cities in Iraq—
With all their weights and dirhams—oft hold back.²⁸

34 For love of this large camp²⁹, whose fate saves lives
Whenever ominous, dark nights arrive.

35 They're noble men, immune from foes' revenge,
Whence fugitives find safety unavenged.

36 Resisting thirst until they found a flood,
A pool that flowed with weapons and men's blood.

37 They settled debts with death, then they dispatched
To pasture that's a noxious, squalid patch.

38 And on my life, Husoyn bin Domdom's crime³⁰
Was inconsistent with a clan sublime.

39 Concealing rancour in his heart, he told
None of his plans, nor were his actions bold.³¹

40 He said: "I'll certainly fulfill this need,"
"Then seek protection with a thousand steeds."

41 So he attacked, yet few around distressed
Whence death had settled for the night to rest,

42 Whence one large lion³², piercing weapons drawn,
With many manes and claws unclipped, had gone.

43 It lashes boldly, swiftly at its foes,
And when unharmed, it deals out savage blows.³³

44 But by your life, their lances did not wreak
Muthallam's death nor that of Ibn Naheek,

45 Nor Nawfal's blood, nor sent forth Wahab's soul;
Nor Ibn Mukhazzam's—Nay! They had no role.

46 And now I see them paying thousands³⁴ strong:
Indemnity in full for all those wronged.

٣١ فَتَعْرُكُكُمْ عَرَكَ الرَّحَى بِثَفَالِهَا وَتَلْقَحُ كِشَافًا، ثُمَّ تُتَسَّجُ، فَتُسَيِّمُ

٣٢ فَتُتَبَّجُ لَكُمْ غُلْمَانٌ أَشْأَمٌ كُلُّهُمْ كَأَحْمَرَ عَادٍ، ثُمَّ تُرْضِعُ فَتَنْطُمِ

٣٣ فَتُغْلِلُ لَكُمْ مَا لَا تُغْلِلُ لِأَهْلِهَا فُرَى بِالْعِرَاقِ مِنْ قَفِيْزٍ وَدِرْهَمِ

٣٤ لِحِيٍّ حِلَالٍ يَعِصُمُ النَّاسَ أَمْرُهُمْ إِذَا طَرَقَتْ إِحْدَى اللَّيَالِي بِمُعْظَمِ

٣٥ كِرَامٍ، فَلَا دُوَّ الضُّغْنِ يُدْرِكُ تَبْلُهُ وَلَا الْجَارِمُ الْجَانِي عَلَيْهِمْ بِمُسْلَمِ

٣٦ رَعَوْا ظِمَامَهُمْ حَتَّى إِذَا تَمَّ أَوْرُدُوا غِمَارًا تَفَرَّى بِالسَّلَاحِ وَبِالدَّمِ

٣٧ فَفَضَّوْا مَنَايَا بَيْنَهُمْ، ثُمَّ أَصْدَرُوا إِلَى كَلَابِ مُسْتَوْبَلٍ مُتَوَخَّمِ

٣٨ لَعْمَرِي لِنِعْمِ الْحَيِّ جَرَّ عَلَيْهِمُو بِمَا لَا يُوَاتِيهِمْ حُصَيْنٌ بِنُ صَمَّصِمِ

٣٩ وَكَانَ طَوَى كَشْحًا عَلَى مُسْتَكْبِنَةٍ فَلَا هُوَ أَبْدَاهَا، وَلَمْ يَتَقَدَّمِ

٤٠ وَقَالَ: سَأَقْضِي حَاجَتِي، ثُمَّ أَتَّقِي عَدُوِّي بِأَلْفٍ مِنْ وَرَائِي مُلْجَمِ

٤١ فَشَدَّ وَلَمْ يُفْنِعْ بِيوتًا كَثِيرَةً لَدَى حَيْثُ أَلَقَتْ رَحْلَهَا أُمَّ قَشَعَمِ

٤٢ لَدَى أَسَدٍ شَاكِي السَّلَاحِ مُقَدِّبِ لَهُ يَبْدُ أَظْفَارُهُ لَمْ تُقْلَمِ

٤٣ جَرِيءٍ مَتَى يُظَلِّمُ بِعَاقِبِ يَظْلُمِهِ سَرِيْعًا، وَإِلَّا يُبْدُ بِالظُّلْمِ يَظْلِمِ

٤٤ لَعْمَرُكَ مَا جَرَّتْ عَلَيْهِمْ رِمَاحُهُمْ دَمَ ابْنِ مِهْيَكٍ، أَوْ قَتِيلِ الْمُثَلَّمِ

٤٥ وَلَا شَارَكَتْ فِي الْمَوْتِ فِي دَمِ نَوْفَلٍ وَلَا وَهَبٍ مِنْهَا وَلَا ابْنِ الْمُخَزَّمِ

٤٦ فَكَلًّا أَرَاهُمْ أَصْبَحُوا يَعْقَلُونَ صَحِيحَاتِ أَلْفٍ بَعْدَ أَلْفٍ مُصْتَمِ

~ Part III: Aphorisms ~

- 47 Whoever disobeys a javelin's base
Obeys its sharpened head before his face. ٤٧ وَمَنْ يَعْصِي أَطْرَافَ الزَّجَاجِ فَإِنَّهُ
يَطِيعُ الْعَوَالِي رُكْبَتِ كُلِّ هَذَمٍ
- 48 Whoever keeps his word is free from blame,
And when his heart finds good, it can't refrain. ٤٨ وَمَنْ يُوفِ لَا يُدْمَمُ، وَمَنْ يُفْضِ قَلْبَهُ
إِلَى مُطْمَئِنِّ السِّرِّ لَا يَتَجَمَّعِمِ
- 49 Whoever fears death's ropes, they trap³⁵, though he
May climb the steps to heaven's ropes to flee. ٤٩ وَمَنْ هَابَ أَشْبَابَ الْمَنَائِيَا يَنْلِنُهُ
وَلَوْ رَامَ أَشْبَابَ السَّمَاءِ بَسَلَّمَ
- 50 Whoever has excess but spends it not
On his poor folk is cursed and left to rot. ٥٠ وَمَنْ يَكُ ذَا فَضْلٍ، فَيُخَلِّ بِفَضْلِهِ
عَلَى قَوْمِهِ يُسْتَعْنَعَنَّ عَنْهُ وَيُدْمَمِ
- 51 Whoever gives his self to those who fret
And frees it not from blame will soon regret. ٥١ وَمَنْ لَا يَزَلُ يَسْتَرْجُلُ النَّاسَ نَفْسَهُ
وَلَا يُعْفِيهَا يَوْمًا مِنَ الدَّمِّ يَنْدَمِ
- 52 Whoever lives afar thinks foes are dear.
Whoever lacks self-worth, none shall revere. ٥٢ وَمَنْ يَغْتَرِبُ يَحْسِبُ عَدُوًّا صَدِيقَهُ
وَمَنْ لَا يُكْرَمُ نَفْسَهُ لَا يُكْرَمِ
- 53 Whoever doesn't guard his turf with arms
Is razed. Whoever does no harm is harmed. ٥٣ وَمَنْ لَا يَبْذُ عَنْ حَوْضِهِ بِسِلَاحِهِ
يُهَدَّمُ، وَمَنْ لَا يَظْلِمُ النَّاسَ يُظْلَمِ
- 54 Whoever doesn't compromise on much
Is chewed by fangs and stomped till he is crushed. ٥٤ وَمَنْ لَا يُصَانِعُ فِي أُمُورٍ كَثِيرَةٍ
يُضْرَسُ بِأَثْيَابٍ وَيُوطَأُ بِمَنْسَمِ
- 55 Whoever's kindness serves his dignity
Is pleased. Averting slurs foils calumny. ٥٥ وَمَنْ يَجْعَلِ الْمَعْرُوفَ مِنْ دُونِ عَرْضِهِ
يَفْرَهُ، وَمَنْ لَا يَتَّقِ الشَّتْمَ يُشْتَمِ
- 56 Life's burdens have me down: whoever goes
A span of eighty years expects these blows. ٥٦ سَمِئَتْ تَكَالِيفَ الْحَيَاةِ، وَمَنْ يَعِشْ
تَبَانِينَ حَوْلًا - لَا أَبَالَكَ - يَسَامِ
- 57 It seems death strikes in night-blind-camel style—
Those struck are killed; those missed grow old, senile. ٥٧ رَأَيْتُ الْمَنَائِيَا حَبِطَ عَشَوَاءَ مَنْ نُصِبَ
تَمْتُهُ، وَمَنْ تَخْطِيءُ يُعَمَّرُ فِيهِمْ
- 58 Whatever traits a person's soul has sown—
And though he think them hidden—they are known. ٥٨ وَمَهْمَا تَكُنْ عِنْدَ امْرِئٍ مِنْ خَلِيقَةٍ
وَإِنْ خَالَهَا تَخْفَى عَلَى النَّاسِ تُعْلَمِ
- 59 I know today's events and what's behind
But as concerns tomorrow, I am blind. ٥٩ وَأَعْلَمُ مَا فِي الْيَوْمِ وَالْأَمْسِ قَبْلَهُ
وَلَكِنِّي عَنْ عِلْمِ مَا فِي غَدِ عَمِي
- 60 How oft a silent man shows signs of grace.
His words then serve to raise him or debase. ٦٠ وَكَأَيُّنْ تَرَى مِنْ صَامِتٍ لَكَ مُعْجِبٍ
زِيَادَتُهُ، أَوْ نَقْصُهُ فِي التَّكَلُّمِ
- 61 For man's two halves are truly tongue and mind,
Which leaves naught but his flesh and blood behind. ٦١ لِسَانَ الْفَتَى نِصْفٌ، وَنِصْفٌ فُؤَادُهُ
فَلَمْ يَبْقَ إِلَّا صُورَةُ اللَّحْمِ وَالِدَمِّ

- 62 Forbearance never changes agèd fools,
But young, hot-tempered men might later cool.
- 63 We ask repeatedly and you provide.
Whoever asks a lot will be denied.



Endnotes

- 1 The word *dimnah* is a small, black remnant of a Bedouin encampment, and can refer either to a small piece of charcoal or dung.
- 2 Umm Awfā was the poet's wife.
- 3 Darrāj Pass is a source of water near Qaisumah on the way from Basra to Mecca.
- 4 Mutathallam is an area in the Summan Plateau.
- 5 *Al-Raḡmatān* are two meadows occurring in Eastern Arabia between Nejd and Basra or possibly in the Summan Plateau.
- 6 The poet compares the abandoned campsite of his beloved Umm Awfā to a touched-up wrist tattoo, as black remnants identified abandoned campsites.
- 7 Jurthum was an area in the lands of the tribe of Banu Asad known for its water.
- 8 Here the poet remembers or imagines his beloved's tribe departing the campsite as he stands before it.
- 9 Qanān is a mountain in the lands of Banu Asad.
- 10 The name of a valley.
- 11 The valley winds, so they would emerge above it and then cross it again.
- 12 The ladies require heavy-duty saddles because they themselves are heavy due to opulence.
- 13 Gooseberries are redder on the outside than the inside.
- 14 i.e. They know how to reach Rass (a city in present-day Saudi Arabia) as well as a hand knows how to reach the mouth it is feeding.

- ٦٢ وَإِنَّ سَفَاهَةَ الشَّيْخِ لَا حِلْمَ بَعْدَهُ وَإِنَّ الْفَتَى بَعْدَ السَّفَاهَةِ يَحْلُمُ
- ٦٣ سَأَلْنَا فَأَعْطَيْتُمْ، وَعَدْنَا فَعُدْتُمْ وَمَنْ أَكْثَرَ التَّسْأَلِ يَوْمًا سَيُحْرَمُ



- 15 i.e. Al-Hārith bin 'Awf and Harim bin Sinān.
- 16 i.e. The Kaaba.
- 17 A Yemeni tribe that the Prophet Ishmael (peace be upon him) married into.
- 18 i.e. Al-Hārith bin 'Awf and Harim bin Sinān.
- 19 The two warring clans.
- 20 Upon declaring war, tribal leaders would put their scented hands together to initiate a pact of fealty until death. According to legend, when men put their hands together with Mansham's perfume, they died in droves.
- 21 Ma'add is the son of 'Adnān, father of the Arabs. Per Arab custom, a man's name includes all of his descendants; i.e. the two of you are the leaders of all of the descendants of Ma'add.
- 22 Camels belonging to noble bloodlines had their ears peeled back so that they would flap.
- 23 i.e. Those who had no sin in the war would gradually pay off the hundreds of camels owed as indemnity. Indemnity was paid in installments as per Arab tradition.
- 24 Blood cupping, or *hijāmah* is a traditional medical practice of Arabs. The poet is saying that those paying all the indemnity for peace were not even responsible for a cup's worth of spilled blood.
- 25 In this simile, the poet compares how war rubbed the affected tribes like a millstone against a leather skin placed underneath it to catch the flour produced.
- 26 In Arab animal husbandry, sheep that give birth twice a year, and camels that give birth every year, are unfavourable, as their offspring are small and frail. In addition to

- comparing war to an animal that gives birth often, thereby having weak offspring, the poet additionally compares it to such animals that give birth to twins every time, so their offspring are even smaller and weaker than normal.
- 27 This is a reference to Ahmar of Thamūd who killed the miraculous she-camel given to the Prophet Sālih (peace be upon him). Scholars say that either the poet used ‘Ad in place of Thamūd for the sake of metre, or that Thamūd are descendants of ‘Ad.
 - 28 i.e. It brings you nothing of value: neither trade goods nor money. Rather, war’s yields are but blood and sorrow. Some scholars are of the opinion that the poet is being sarcastic, as yields are usually positive.
 - 29 i.e. Both tribal leaders left no stone unturned for the sake of the stability of this large camp whose fate determined the safety of those living in the surrounding area.
 - 30 Husoyn bin Domdom killed his brother’s killer without making his intention known to anyone, thereby reigniting war between the clans.
 - 31 i.e. He waited until there was no risk in killing his brother’s killer.
 - 32 Scholars differ what the lion refers to. Al-Zozani says the poet means Husoyn bin Domdom while al-Durrah says he’s referring to an army from the tribe of the victim.
 - 33 To Pre-Islamic Arabs, attacking oppressively and preemptively was seen as a sign of strength.
 - 34 i.e. Thousands of camels.
 - 35 i.e. Whoever fears death’s ropes will be trapped by them.



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