

The Earths Like Unto the Heavens: A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Commentary on the Last Verse of Surah At-Talaq (Q 65:12) and the Quranic Case for Extraterrestrial Life

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Abstract

The final verse of Surah At-Talaq (Q 65:12) is, in the judgment of this author, perhaps the most fundamental verse of the Holy Quran concerning extraterrestrial life. It declares that God created "seven heavens, and of the earth the like thereof," and that His command descends continuously among them. Fourteen centuries before the first exoplanet was confirmed, the Quran spoke in no uncertain terms of a plurality of earths — a claim that no astronomy of late antiquity, Ptolemaic or otherwise, could have supplied, and one that modern astrophysics has now rendered not merely plausible but overwhelmingly probable. The observable universe, by the maximal accepted estimate, contains roughly two trillion (2×10^{12}) galaxies — a figure ten times higher than older counts, derived by mathematical modeling of the small, faint early galaxies that current telescopes cannot directly resolve. Within our own Milky Way alone, billions of planets orbit within the habitable zones of their stars.

Yet the genius of the Quran lies not merely in stating a cosmological fact, but in where it places that fact. This cosmic declaration is not set in a chapter about the heavens; it concludes a surah devoted to divorce — to waiting periods, maintenance payments, lactation arrangements, and the raw grief of a dissolving household. The placement is deliberate and pastoral. The believer of our era, who has awoken to the possibility of life scattered across two trillion galaxies, is invited to reason a fortiori: the God whose infinite Providence sustains every need arising across that unimaginable expanse can easily — effortlessly — provide for one believer navigating the wreckage of a divorce, if only he or she trusts in Him and follows His commands. This essay offers a verse-by-verse linkage of 65:12 to the whole of Surah At-Talaq, examines the classical exegesis of the "seven earths," surveys the modern astronomy that illuminates the verse, and gathers the supporting witness of Q 42:29, Q 30:17–18, and Q 10:65–66, drawing throughout on this author's prior writings collected at thequran.love.

I. The Verse Itself

اللَّهُ الَّذِي خَلَقَ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ وَمِنَ الْأَرْضِ مِثْلَهُنَّ يَتَنَزَّلُ الْأَمْرُ بَيْنَهُنَّ لِتَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ قَدْ أَحَاطَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عِلْمًا

"It is God who created seven heavens and of the earth a like number. His command descends between them, so that you may know that God has power over all things and that God encompasses all things in His knowledge." (Q 65:12, MAS Abdel Haleem)

Three claims are packed into this single verse, and each repays close reading.

First, the plurality of earths. The phrase *wa mina al-arḍi mithlahunna* — "and of the earth the like thereof" — is unique in the entire Quran. Nowhere else is the plurality of earths stated so directly. The heavens are described as "seven" throughout the Quran, but only here is the earth explicitly declared to have counterparts "like unto them." This is the verse's astonishing singularity: it does not say God created the earth *beneath* the seven heavens, or *within* them, but that He created *of the earth* — of the earthly kind, the terrestrial kind, the kind that hosts soil and water and creatures — a multiplicity corresponding to the multiplicity of the heavens.

Second, the descending command. *Yatanazzalu al-amru baynahunna* — "the command descends among them" — uses the intensive, continuous form. This is not a completed past act but an ongoing administration. The divine *amr* — the governing decree, the sustaining word, what this author has elsewhere called the operating system of the "Inshallah universe" — circulates perpetually among all the heavens and all the earths. Whatever lives in them, wherever it lives, is governed, sustained, and provided for at this very moment.

Third, the stated purpose. *Li-ta 'lamū* — "so that you may know." The verse announces its own reason for revelation. The plurality of worlds is disclosed not to satisfy curiosity but to teach two attributes: that God has power over all things (*qadīr*), and that His knowledge encompasses all things (*aḥāṭa bi-kulli shay 'in 'ilmā*). The cosmos is revealed as a lesson in omnipotence and omniscience — and, as we shall see, that lesson is aimed with surgical precision at the anxious, grieving reader of the preceding eleven verses.

The Meaning of "Seven"

In classical Arabic usage, *sabʿ* (seven) frequently signifies not an arithmetic count but an indefinite multiplicity — completeness, abundance, a number beyond easy reckoning. The Quran itself models this idiom: "If all the trees on earth were pens and the sea, with seven more seas added to it, were ink, the words of God would not run out" (Q 31:27). No one imagines that an eighth sea would suffice where seven failed; "seven seas" means seas without end. Likewise Q 2:261 speaks of a grain that grows seven ears, each bearing a hundred grains — an image of uncountable divine multiplication. Read in this light, "seven heavens and of the earth the like thereof" is the seventh-century Arabic idiom for what the twenty-first century would phrase as: *innumerable cosmic domains, and innumerable earths distributed among them*. As I argued in "The Miracle of the Quran: It Speaks of Innumerable Stars and Innumerable Earths" (thequran.love, June 2024), the verse's language was calibrated to be intelligible to a desert audience and yet infinitely expandable — a container the size of whatever cosmos humanity would eventually discover.

II. The Classical Commentators: A Tradition That Never Flinched

It is sometimes suggested that reading extraterrestrial worlds into the Quran is a modern imposition. The classical tradition refutes this decisively — the plurality of earths was affirmed at the very fountainhead of tafsir.

Ibn ʿAbbās, the Prophet's cousin and the father of Quranic exegesis, made a statement on this verse so bold that some early transmitters hesitated to circulate it. As preserved by al-Ḥākim in his *Mustadrak* (where he graded its chain sound) and cited by Ibn Kathīr in his commentary on 65:12, Ibn ʿAbbās said: "Seven earths: in every earth is a prophet like your Prophet, an Adam like your Adam, a Noah like their Noah, an Abraham like their Abraham, and a Jesus like their Jesus." Whatever one makes of every detail of this report, its thrust is unmistakable: the greatest exegete of the first generation understood *mithlahunna* to mean other inhabited worlds — worlds populated, moreover, by morally accountable beings to whom God sends guidance. Sixth-century Arabia had no telescope and no motive to invent such a doctrine; it flowed from the plain sense of the verse.

Al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) records the straightforward reading that God created seven earths corresponding to the seven heavens, transmitting the early reports without embarrassment. **Al-Rāzī** (d. 1210), the tradition's great philosopher-exegete, discusses in his *Tafsīr al-Kabīr* whether the seven earths are stacked strata or separated worlds, and — characteristically unafraid of cosmological speculation — allows that God's power is not exhausted by our world: nothing in reason forbids that He created other worlds beyond this one. **Al-Qurṭubī** (d. 1273) preserves the report of the seven earths with "in each earth creatures like the creatures of this earth." **Ibn Kathīr** (d. 1373) gathers the relevant hadith, including the Prophet's warning that one who unjustly seizes a span of land will be collared with it "from seven earths" — earths substantial enough to be seized and weighed.

The tradition, in short, always read this verse as teaching real, plural, populated earths. What it lacked was only the observational science to say where they were. That science has now arrived.

III. The Scientific Commentary: Two Trillion Galaxies

Consider what has happened to our census of the cosmos within living memory. When this author was in medical school, the standard estimate held that the observable universe contained perhaps one to two hundred billion galaxies. Then, in 2016, Christopher Conselice and colleagues, working from Hubble deep-field imagery converted into three-dimensional maps and extended by mathematical models that account for the small, faint early galaxies no current telescope can directly resolve, concluded that the true number is roughly **two trillion galaxies** — 2×10^{12} — **ten times the older estimates**. This remains the maximal accepted estimate for the observable universe. Two trillion galaxies, each a metropolis of hundreds of billions of stars, and — as we now know — stars are not solitary lamps but the hearths of planetary families.

The exoplanet revolution supplies the second half of the picture. Since the first confirmed detection of a planet orbiting a sun-like star in 1995 — a discovery that earned Michel Mayor and Didier Queloz the Nobel Prize in Physics — astronomers have confirmed thousands of exoplanets, and statistical analyses of the Kepler mission's data indicate that

planets outnumber stars in our galaxy, with billions of rocky worlds orbiting within the "Goldilocks zones" where liquid water can persist. Multiply the habitable-zone planets of one galaxy by two trillion galaxies, and the phrase *wa mina al-arḍi mithlahunna* — "and of the earth the like thereof" — reads less like ancient poetry and more like a mission briefing for the James Webb Space Telescope, which is even now spectroscopically sampling the atmospheres of distant earths for the fingerprints of water, carbon dioxide, and — perhaps one day — biology.

Let me be precise about the epistemology here, for I have always distinguished my approach from concordist apologetics. I do not claim the Quran "predicted" the Conselice count, nor do I hang faith on any particular number, which future surveys may refine. My claim, developed across my collection on extraterrestrial life at thequran.love, is one of *resonance and anticipation*: a seventh-century text, revealed in a milieu with no astronomy capable of even framing the question, committed itself in no uncertain terms to a plurality of earths and to living creatures dispersed through the heavens — commitments that every subsequent century of science has made more credible, never less. Ptolemaic cosmology, which dominated the intellectual world into which Islam expanded, held the earth to be unique and central. The Quran declined that consensus. That refusal, vindicated across fourteen centuries, is what I mean when I say that science functions as an ever-expanding commentary on the Quran.

IV. The Supporting Witnesses

The last verse of Surah At-Talaq does not stand alone. Three other passages, each hinting directly or indirectly at extraterrestrial life, form with it a mutually reinforcing constellation.

1. The Creatures Scattered Through the Heavens — Q 42:29

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ خَلْقُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَثَّ فِيهِمَا مِنْ دَابَّةٍ ۚ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ جَمْعِهِمْ إِذَا يَشَاءُ قَدِيرٌ

"Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and earth and all the living creatures He has scattered throughout them: He has the power to gather them all together whenever He will." (Q 42:29, MAS Abdel Haleem)

If 65:12 is the most fundamental verse on extraterrestrial life, 42:29 is the most explicit. The word *dābbah* denotes a moving, physical, corporeal creature — the same word the Quran uses for the animals of our own earth. It cannot be reduced to angels, who are elsewhere described in categorically different terms and who are not "scattered" (*baththa*, the verb used for dispersing living things across a habitat). The verse states plainly that such creatures exist *fīhimā* — "in them both," in the heavens as in the earth. And it closes with a clause that reads, to modern ears, almost like a prophecy of contact: God is able to *gather them together* whenever He wills. In "Where are they, all those Aliens? The Quran Did Prophesize them" (thequran.love, December 2024), I suggested that this verse holds open the possibility of a future meeting — whether in this world through discovery, or in the next

through the universal gathering — that the Quran alone among ancient scriptures had the audacity to anticipate. Fermi asked, "Where is everybody?" The Quran answered thirteen centuries before he asked: scattered through the heavens and the earth, and gatherable at the pleasure of their common Lord.

2. Praise in the Heavens — Q 30:17-18

فَسُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ حِينَ تُمْسُونَ وَحِينَ تُصْبِحُونَ ﴿١٧﴾ وَلَهُ الْحَمْدُ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَعَشِيًّا وَحِينَ تُظْهِرُونَ

"So glorify God in the evening and in the morning — praise is due to Him in the heavens and the earth — in the late afternoon, and at midday." (Q 30:17-18, MAS Abdel Haleem)

Here the hint is subtler and therefore, in its way, more profound. The verse braids together the daily prayer times of the believer on earth with the declaration that praise (*al-ḥamd*) belongs to God *in the heavens* as well as in the earth. Praise, in the Quran's grammar, is the activity of the aware — of beings capable of recognizing their Sustainer. While the Quran elsewhere teaches that all things glorify God in a mode we do not comprehend (Q 17:44), the pairing here of celestial praise with the timed, deliberate worship of earthly believers gently suggests communities of conscious worshippers in the heavens, keeping their own liturgies under their own skies, their own evenings and mornings. The devotional life of the cosmos, this verse implies, is not confined to one small planet. When we rise for Fajr, we may be joining a chorus already in progress across two trillion galaxies.

3. All Persons in the Heavens Belong to Him — Q 10:65-66

وَلَا يَحْزَنكَ قَوْلُهُمْ إِنَّ الْعِزَّةَ لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًا ۖ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٦٥﴾ أَلَا إِنَّ لِلَّهِ مَنْ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ ۚ وَمَا يَتَّبِعُ الَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ شُرَكَاءَ ۖ إِنْ يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا الظَّنَّ وَإِنْ هُمْ إِلَّا يَخْرُصُونَ

"Do not let their words grieve you. Power belongs entirely to God; He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing. Surely, to God belong all who are in the heavens and all who are on the earth. Those who invoke partners beside God follow nothing but conjecture; they do nothing but guess." (Q 10:65-66)

The decisive word here is *man* (مَنْ) — "whoever," the Arabic relative pronoun reserved for rational, personal beings, as distinct from *mā* (whatever), used for things. The verse does not say "whatever is in the heavens belongs to God"; it says "*whoever* is in the heavens." Classical grammarians and exegetes were fully alert to this distinction. The Quran here quietly assumes a population of persons in the heavens — and note the pastoral setting, which anticipates the logic of Surah At-Talaq itself: the verse opens by consoling the Prophet, "Do not let their words grieve you." The remedy prescribed for grief is the contemplation of God's dominion over every rational being in the heavens and the earth. He who owns the allegiance of all celestial persons can surely vindicate one grieved messenger in Mecca — or, as At-Talaq will teach, one grieved spouse anywhere. (I have also treated the epistemology of this passage — its contrast between conjecture, *ẓann*, and truth — in my recent essays on Quranic epistemology; the polytheists guess about the cosmos, while revelation speaks of it with the confidence of its Maker.)

V. Linking the Last Verse to the Whole Surah: From the Threshold of a Home to the Edge of the Cosmos

Now we arrive at the heart of this essay: the question of *placement*. Why does the Quran's most fundamental verse on the plurality of worlds conclude a surah about divorce?

Surah At-Talaq is twelve verses long. Its first seven verses are among the most granular legislation in the entire Quran, and its architecture is a deliberate oscillation between the human microcosm and the cosmic macrocosm — a structure I explored in "Surah Talaq and God's Infinite Providence" and "From the Threshold of a Home to the Edge of the Cosmos" (thequran.love, May 2026). Let us walk through it.

Verse 1 commands that divorce be conducted with counted waiting periods, that women not be expelled from their homes, and it closes with a door left open: "you never know: God may bring about a new situation." Even in the first verse, the surah teaches that the future is not sealed; the God who governs it may yet turn separation into reconciliation.

Verses 2–3 contain the surah's first great refrain of Providence:

وَمَنْ يَتَّقِ اللَّهَ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ مَخْرَجًا ۖ وَيَرْزُقْهُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَا يَحْتَسِبُ ۚ وَمَنْ يَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ فَهُوَ حَسْبُهُ

"Anyone who is mindful of God, God will grant him a way out and will provide for him from an unexpected source; God will be enough for anyone who puts his trust in Him."
(Q 65:2–3)

Here are the three keys of the surah: *taqwā* (mindfulness of God), *tawakkul* (trust in Him), and *rizq* (provision) arriving "from where he could never imagine" (*min ḥaythu lā yaḥtasib*). The promised *makhraj* — the way out — is what I have called the cosmic exit strategy. But on what authority does the promise rest? The divorcing believer, facing an empty house and an uncertain income, may well ask: *can* God really provide from unimaginable sources? The surah defers its answer to verse 12.

Verse 4 prescribes the waiting periods for particular cases and adds the second refrain: "God makes things easy for those who are mindful of Him" — the promise of *yusr*, ease.

Verse 5 gives the third refrain: whoever is mindful of God, "He will wipe out his sins and increase his reward." Note the crescendo across the three refrains: first material provision, then existential ease, then spiritual purification and eternal reward — Providence widening from the wallet to the heart to the hereafter.

Verses 6–7 descend into the tenderest particulars: housing the waiting wife according to one's means, maintenance during pregnancy, wages for nursing the child, mutual consultation "in a good way." And then the fourth refrain, addressed explicitly to the man of straitened means: "let the wealthy man spend according to his wealth, and let him whose provision is restricted spend according to what God has given him. God does not burden any soul beyond what He has given it — after hardship, God will bring ease" (*sa-yajʿalu Allāhu baʿda ʿusrin yusrā*). This is legislation with a heartbeat. The Quran knows that

divorce is not only a legal event but a financial terror, especially for the poor, and it answers that terror with a promise.

Verses 8–11 pivot outward to history: the towns that insolently disobeyed their Lord's command (*amr*) and were called to severe account; the Messenger sent reciting clarifying revelations "to bring those who believe and do good deeds from darkness into light." The keyword *amr* — command — appears here in its judicial register: communities that defied the command met its consequences. Hold that word.

Verse 12 then detonates the surah's horizon. The same *amr* that the ancient towns defied, the same *amr* whose observance in divorce law the first seven verses detailed, is now revealed in its true scale: *yatanazzalu al-amru baynahunna* — it descends perpetually among seven heavens and as many earths. The command regulating a waiting period in a single household in Medina is one filament of the command administering two trillion galaxies. And the verse tells us why we are shown this: *li-ta 'lamū* — so that you may know that God has power over all things and encompasses all things in knowledge.

Here, then, is the surah's complete logic, and it is a *qiyās al-awlā* — an a fortiori argument, an argument from the greater to the lesser, of exactly the kind the Quran loves (cf. Q 40:57: "the creation of the heavens and earth is greater than the creation of mankind"):

- The surah promises a **way out** (v. 2). Verse 12 shows the Guarantor: He whose command threads between all the heavens and all the earths is never cornered; for Him there is always a way out, and unimaginably many.
- The surah promises provision **from unimagined sources** (v. 3). Verse 12 shows the inventory: the *rizq* of a universe of worlds. The believer cannot imagine the sources precisely because his imagination stops at one earth, while his Provider administers earths "like unto" the heavens themselves. As I wrote in the May 2026 article, when we recognize that the Command of God traverses this vast, interconnected web of life and celestial bodies, our personal anxieties and financial hardships are placed into their proper, manageable perspective.
- The surah promises **ease after hardship** (vv. 4, 7). Verse 12 shows the competence: the engineering of a biophilic cosmos — fine-tuned, as I have argued in my fine-tuning collection, in its constants and laws so that life could arise at all — is the résumé of the One who undertakes to ease a single human affair.
- The surah warns of **accountability** (vv. 8–10). Verse 12 shows the reach: His knowledge encompasses all things; no injustice in any household on any earth escapes it.
- The surah commands **trust** — *tawakkul* (v. 3). Verse 12 supplies its rational ground. Trust is not a leap into the dark; it is the sober conclusion of cosmology. One does not doubt the solvency of a benefactor who maintains two trillion galaxies.

This is why I say the verse was included as the conclusion of this surah so *that believers in our time* — the first generation of believers to have actually counted the galaxies, mapped the exoplanets, and awoken to the realistic possibility of extraterrestrial life — *should appreciate the argument at its full strength*. The seventh-century believer read verse 12 and trusted. The twenty-first-century believer reads verse 12 with the Hubble Ultra Deep Field open on a second screen, and trusts with reasons the seventh century could not have dreamed. Revelation wrote a promissory note; astronomy keeps enlarging the account on which it is drawn. The God with such infinite Providence — who provides across two trillion galaxies and meets all the needs arising therein, whatever creatures those worlds contain — can easily provide the needs of a believer in the crisis of a divorce, the one who puts trust in Him and follows His commands.

VI. Philosophical Commentary: Why Scale Comforts

A skeptic might object that cosmic vastness should crush the individual rather than console her — Pascal's terror before "the eternal silence of these infinite spaces." The Quran's move in Surah At-Talaq is the precise inversion of Pascal's vertigo, and the inversion is philosophically instructive.

Vastness terrifies only if it is *empty of intention*. An indifferent infinity dwarfs us; an administered infinity dignifies us. The hinge is the middle clause of verse 12: the command *descends among them*. The two trillion galaxies are not a wasteland but a jurisdiction; not silence, but — if Q 30:18 is heard rightly — a standing chorus of praise. Within such a cosmos, smallness is not insignificance, because significance was never a function of size. The verse's closing attributes make the point: power and knowledge, *qudrah* and *ilm*, are the two divine perfections that scale cannot dilute. A human father's care thins as his dependents multiply; that is finitude. Infinite power and encompassing knowledge do not divide across their objects — the believer in Binghamton receives undiminished attention in the same instant as whatever servant of God keeps the evening prayer under a double sunset in a galaxy our telescopes register as a smudge. This is the metaphysics beneath the pastoral promise: only an infinite Provider can make "God is enough for him" (v. 3) true of every claimant simultaneously.

There is a second philosophical dividend. The discovery — or even the serious possibility — of extraterrestrial life has been advertised by some as a defeater for religion, on the theory that scripture is irredeemably geocentric. Whatever force that objection has against other traditions, it dissolves entirely against a scripture whose very first verse names God *Rabb al- 'ālamīn* — Lord of all the worlds — and whose surah on divorce ends by multiplying the earths. Islam does not await the discovery of extraterrestrial life with dread; it has, so to speak, already set a place for the guests. Should biosignatures one day be confirmed in an exoplanet's atmosphere, the Muslim will not revise a single article of faith. She will simply recite Q 42:29 and marvel that the gathering has drawn one step nearer.

VII. Theological Epilogue: The God of Galaxies at the Kitchen Table

Every reader of Surah At-Talaq eventually notices the strange company its verses keep: nursing wages and nebulae, waiting periods and worlds without number. The juxtaposition is not an editorial accident. It is the surah's entire theology, compressed into a single gesture — the same hand that steadies the trembling signatory of a divorce document is the hand that steadies two trillion galaxies in their courses.

We live in the first age that can feel the full weight of that gesture. Our ancestors trusted the promise of verse 3 — provision from unimagined sources — against the backdrop of one earth and a few thousand visible stars. We trust it against a backdrop of 2×10^{12} galaxies, billions of habitable worlds in our galaxy alone, and a Quran that told us, in no uncertain terms and fourteen centuries in advance, that the earth was never alone: *seven heavens, and of the earth the like thereof*. The last verse of Surah At-Talaq was waiting for us. It was placed at the end of a surah about heartbreak so that when humanity finally looked up and grasped the true size of the household God keeps, the divorcee, the abandoned, the anxious, and the poor would draw the intended conclusion — not "how small am I," but "how safe am I."

The command descends among all the worlds; it can certainly find your address. He who feeds whatever moves in the heavens will not overlook one trusting soul on this earth. Keep His commands through the crisis, as the surah asks — the counted days, the just maintenance, the kind consultation — and the rest is underwritten by the Sustainer of the galaxies. *Wa man yatawakkal 'alā Allāhi fa-huwa ḥasbuh*: whoever puts his trust in God, He is enough for him — enough on this earth, and on every earth like unto it.

The author's full collection on the Quran and extraterrestrial life is available at thequran.love/category/extra-terrestrial-life/, including "Surah Talaq and God's Infinite Providence" (May 2026), "From the Threshold of a Home to the Edge of the Cosmos: A Thematic Tafsir of Surah At-Talaq" (May 2026), "Our Universe May Be Teeming with Intelligent Life: A Devotional Exploration" (July 2025), "Quranic Perspective on Other Earths and Extraterrestrial Life" (June 2025), "Where are they, all those Aliens? The Quran Did Prophesize them" (December 2024), and "The Miracle of the Quran: It Speaks of Innumerable Stars and Innumerable Earths" (June 2024).