

# al-Ma'arri

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## Introduction

Al-Ma'arri (973-1057), whose full name was Abu 'L'Ala Ahmad ibn 'Abdallah al-Ma'arri, was born in Ma'arra, south of Aleppo. He achieved fame as one of the greatest of Arab poets. Al-Ma'arri was stricken with smallpox when four and became blind. As he grew older, he was able to travel to Aleppo, Antioch and other Syrian cities, learning by heart the manuscripts preserved there. Al-Ma'arri spent 18 months at Baghdad, then the center of learning and poetry, leaving to return to his native town. There he created the *Luzumiyyat*, a large collection of verses that contrasts from traditional works by its irregular structure and in the opinions it contains. His presence in Ma'arra drew many people, who came to hear him lecture on poetry and rhetoric.

Of himself, al-Ma'arri wrote "Men of acute mind call me an ascetic, but they are wrong in their diagnosis. Although I disciplined my desires, I only abandoned worldly pleasures because the best of these withdrew themselves from me." But his somewhat misanthropic nature appears in another remark: "I was made an abstainer from mankind by my acquaintance with them and my knowledge that created beings are dust."

In the meditations of the *Luzumiyyat* are sentiments which, had they not been surrounded by many expressions of pious faith, would have incurred a charge of heresy. In a somewhat oblique apology for any offenses his work might engender, al-Ma'arri said "I have not sought to embellish my verse by means of fiction or fill my pages with love idylls, battle scenes, descriptions of wine parties and the like. My aim is to speak the truth. Now, the proper end of poetry is not truth, but falsehood, and in proportion as it is diverted from its proper end its perfection is impaired. Therefore I must crave the indulgence of my readers for this book of moral poetry."

Al-Ma'arri's skepticism of all religions reminds us of *Xenophanes*, *Carvaka*, and *Lucretius*, and does not re-appear in Western thought until the Enlightenment. He was equally sarcastic towards the religions of Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Al-Ma'arri remarked that monks in their cloisters or devotees in their mosques were blindly following the beliefs of their locality: if they were born among Magians or Sabians they would have become Magians or Sabians.

*Al-Ma'arri was a rationalist who valued reason above tradition or revelation. Like Carvaka he saw religion in general as a human institution invented as a source of power and income for its founders and priesthood, who pursued worldly ends with forged documents attributed to divine inspiration. Like [Vardhamana](#) and the Jains, al-Ma'arri believed in the sanctity of life, urging that no living creature should be harmed. He became a vegetarian and opposed all killing of animals, and the use of animal skins for clothing.*

*Al-Ma'arri passed judgments with a freedom that must have offended the privileged members of his society. In Reynold Nicholson's words "Amidst his meditations on the human tragedy, a fierce hatred of injustice, hypocrisy, and superstition blazes out." Many of the extracts below are taken from Nicholson's translation.*

## Calmness

### 1 A Friend Who Can Talk Well

The world's best moment is a calm hour passed  
 In listening to a friend who can talk well.  
 How wonderful is life from first to last!  
 But ancient Time keeps ever young in tooth:  
 His ruin cuts down nations in their prime.  
 In every region Time prepares their graves—  
 None ever digs the grave of Time.

**Al-Ma'arri**

### 2 Refrain from Speech

Whenever man from speech refrains, his foes are few,  
 Even though he's stricken down by fortune and falls low.  
 Silently the flea sips up its fill of human blood,  
 Thus making less the heinousness of its sin:  
 It follows not the way parched mosquitoes go,  
 Trumpeting with high-trilled note, you smarting all the while.  
 If an insolent man thrusts a sword of speech against you,  
 Oppose him with your patience, so you may break its edge.

**Al-Ma'arri**

### 3 Disbelieve in Transmigration

Spirits are said to move by transmigration  
 From body into body, till they are purged;

But disbelieve what error may have urged,  
Unless your mind confirm the information.

Though high their heads they carry, like the palm,  
Bodies are but as herbs that grow and fade.  
Hard polishing wears out the tempered blade,  
Allay your soul's desires and live calm.

**Al-Ma'arri**

#### **4 Victory will Bring Revenge**

If time aids thee to victory, he will aid  
Thy foe anon to take a full revenge.  
The days' meridian heats bear off as spoil  
That shed from the moist dawn gone by.

**Al-Ma'arri**

## **Sanctity of Life**

#### **5 The Body is Your Vase**

The body, which gives you during life a form,  
Is but your vase: be not deceived, my soul!  
Cheap is the bowl for storing honey in,  
But precious for the contents of the bowl.

**Al-Ma'arri**

#### **6 I No Longer Steal from Nature**

You are diseased in understanding and religion.  
Come to me, that you may hear something of sound truth.  
Do not unjustly eat fish the water has given up,  
And do not desire as food the flesh of slaughtered animals,  
Or the white milk of mothers who intended its pure draught  
for their young, not noble ladies.  
And do not grieve the unsuspecting birds by taking eggs;  
for injustice is the worst of crimes.

And spare the honey which the bees get industriously  
from the flowers of fragrant plants;  
For they did not store it that it might belong to others,  
Nor did they gather it for bounty and gifts.  
I washed my hands of all this; and wish that I  
Perceived my way before my hair went gray!

**Al-Ma'arri**

## **Reason and Truth**

### **7 Falsehood is Perpetual Loss**

Reason forbade me many things which,  
Instinctively, my nature was attracted to;  
And a perpetual loss I feel if, knowing,  
I believe a falsehood or deny the truth.

**Al-Ma'arri**

### **8 What Choice Has Man?**

Had men followed me, confound them,  
Well had I guided them to truth  
Or to some plain track by which  
They might arrive there soon.  
For here I've lived until I'm tired  
Of Time, and it of me;  
And my heart has sipped  
The cream of life's experience.

What choice has a man but solitude and loneliness,  
When fate grants him nothing that he craves?  
Do what you will, make peace or war:  
The days with arbitrary hand bestow  
Their measure to warrior and man of peace.

**Al-Ma'arri**

### **9 None to Lead but Reason**

You've had your way a long, long time,  
 You kings and tyrants,  
 And still you work injustice hour by hour.  
 What ails you that do not tread a path of glory?  
 A man may take the field, although he love the bower.

But some hope a divine leader with prophetic voice  
 Will rise amid the gazing silent ranks.  
 An idle thought! There's none to lead but reason,  
 To point the morning and the evening ways.

**Al-Ma'arri**

## **10 The Large Gifts of Death**

Who'll rescue me from living in a town  
 Where I am spoken of with praise unfit ?  
 Rich, pious, learned: such is my renown,  
 But many a barrier stands between me and it.

I admit to ignorance, yet wise was thought  
 By some—and is not ours a wondrous case?  
 For truly we all are good for naught:  
 I am not noble nor are they not base.

My body in life's strait grip scarce bears the strain—  
 How shall I move decay to clasp it round?  
 O the large gifts of death! Ease after pain  
 He brings to us, and silence after sound.

**Al-Ma'arri**

## **11 Truth Hides Her Face**

Experience nests in thickets of close shade,  
 Who gives his mind and life may hunt it down.  
 How many months and years have I outstayed!  
 And yet, I think myself a fool and clown.

And falsehood like a star all naked stands,  
 But truth still hides her face in hood and veil.

Is there no ship or shore my outstretched hands  
May grasp, to save me from this malicious sea?

**Al-Ma'arri**

## **12 The Scoundrel's Plea**

Make not, when you work a deed of shame,  
The scoundrel's plea, "My forbears did the same".

**Al-Ma'arri**

## **13 Time and Space**

Two fates still hold us fast,  
A future and a past;  
Two vessels' vast embrace  
Surrounds us—time and space.

And when we ask what end  
Our maker did intend,  
Some answering voice is heard  
That utters no plain word.

**Al-Ma'arri**

# **Mortality**

## **14 Death Stalks the Night**

I bid each day farewell, aware its like,  
Once gone from me, will never more return.  
Ill-starred are easy ways on which the careless stroll,  
Although they rank their lot a happy one.  
For me, it's as though I ride an old and jaded beast,  
When outstretched on a bough  
The lizard basks in the blaze of noon.  
Death stalks the night when friends and enemies sleep on,  
And ever is afoot while we recline at ease.

**Al-Ma'arri**

## 15 The Present Hour is Yours

The city's leading cleric went out to bury his friend;  
 Do you not see he brought no lesson from the grave?  
 The present hour is yours; the past, a babble of a dream;  
 And what remains has nothing sweet in store for you.

**Al-Ma'arri**

## 16 The Bitter Draught of Life

Ah, let us go, whom nature gave firm minds  
 And taught us to hold courage firmly fast,  
 To meet the fates pursuing us, that we may die at last.  
 The draught of life, to me it seems a bitter thing to drain;  
 And see, in bitter truth, we spew it out again.

**Al-Ma'arri**

## 17 Guidance of Confusion

Birth I chose not, nor old age, nor to live:  
 What the past grudged me shall the present give?  
 Here must I stay, by fates' two hands constrained,  
 And not leave until my leaving is ordained.  
 You who would guide me out of dark illusion,  
 You lie—your story contains nothing but confusion.  
 For can you alter that you brand with shame,  
 Or is it not unalterably the same?

**Al-Ma'arri**

## 18 Who is Saved from the Grave?

Age after age entirely dark hath run  
 When not one dawn revealed a rising sun.  
 Things change and pass, the world unshaken stands  
 With all its western, all its eastern lands.

The pen flowed and the fiat was fulfilled,  
 The ink dried on the parchment as fate willed.  
 Could the king his governors around him save—  
 Or Caesar his patricians—from the grave?

**Al-Ma'arri****19 The Arrogant beneath our Feet**

It's sorrow enough that after he roamed at will,  
 The days beckon a man and say,  
 "Leave, and enter now a grave!"  
 How many times have our feet trodden beneath the dust  
 A brow of the arrogant, a skull of the debonair!

**Al-Ma'arri****20 Life's Short Thread**

When I would string the pearls of my desire,  
 Alas, life's too short thread denies them room.  
 Huge volumes cannot yet contain entire  
 Man's hope; his life is but a summary of doom.

**Al-Ma'arri****21 Perish or Live in Pain?**

Over many a race the sun's bright net was spread  
 And loosed their pearls nor left them even a thread.  
 This dire world delights us, though all sup—  
 All whom she mothers—from one mortal cup.  
 Choose from two ills: which rather in the main  
 Suits you? —to perish or to live in pain?

**Al-Ma'arri****22 Shattered Like Glass**

We laugh, but inept is our laughter,  
 We should weep, and weep sore,  
 Who are shattered like glass and thereafter  
 Remolded no more.

**Al-Ma'arri****Those Who Falsely Lead Us**

## 23 Leaders Wrong Their Subjects

My stay in the world is wearisome:  
How long shall I associate with a people  
Whose leaders command what is not good for it?  
They wronged their subjects, allowed themselves  
To deceive them and neglect their interests,  
Although they are their hirelings.

**Al-Ma'arri**

## 24 Servants of the People

If we consider things well,  
They surely disclose this secret:  
The people's leader is the servant  
Of those he rules.

**Al-Ma'arri**

# Religion and Superstition

## 25 Creation Reveals A Lack of Sense

You said, "A wise one created us ";  
That may be true, we would agree.  
"Outside of time and space," you postulated.  
Then why not say at once that you  
Propound a mystery immense  
Which tells us of our lack of sense?

**Al-Ma'arri**

## 26 The Two Universal Sects

They all err—Moslems, Jews,  
Christians, and Zoroastrians:  
Humanity follows two world-wide sects:  
One, man intelligent without religion,  
The second, religious without intellect.

**Al-Ma'arri**

## 27 The Cheat of Sacred Rites

O fools, awake! The rites you sacred hold  
Are but a cheat contrived by men of old,  
Who lusted after wealth and gained their lust  
And died in baseness—and their law is dust.

**Al-Ma'arri**

## 28 A Spoken Lie Enforced by Blood

Had they been left alone with reason,  
they would not have accepted a spoken lie;  
but the whips were raised to strike them.  
Traditions were brought to them,  
and they were ordered to say,  
"We have been told the truth";  
If they refused, the sword was drenched with their blood.  
They were terrified by scabbards of calamities,  
and tempted by great bowls of food,  
Offered in a lofty and condescending manner.

**Al-Ma'arri**

## 29 Death's Debt is Paid in Full

Death's debt is then and there  
Paid down by dying men;  
But it is a promise bare  
That they shall rise again.

**Al-Ma'arri**

## 30 Scenes that Stun Introspection

For his own sordid ends  
The pulpit he ascends,  
And though he disbelieves in resurrection,  
Makes all his hearers quail  
Whilst he unfolds a tale  
Of Last Day scenes that stun all introspection.

**Al-Ma'arri**

### 31 The Hand Lies Open

Your thought kindled a fire that showed beside you  
A path while you were seeking light to guide you.  
Stargazers, charmers, soothsayers are cheats,  
All of that sort a cunning greed dissemble:  
However much the aged beggar's hand may tremble,  
It none the less lies open for receipts.

**Al-Ma'arri**

### 32 Creator of Wrongs

If criminals are fated,  
It's wrong to punish crime.  
When God earth's ores created,  
He knew that on a time  
They would become the sources  
For sword blades dripping blood  
To flash across the manes of horses  
Iron-curbed, iron-shod.

**Al-Ma'arri**

### 33 Creeds as Fairy Tales

So, too, the creeds of man: the one prevails  
Until the other comes; and this one fails  
When that one triumphs; ay, the lonesome world  
Will always want the latest fairy tales.

**Al-Ma'arri**

### 34 What is Religion?

What is religion? A maid kept close that no eye may view her;  
The price of her wedding gifts and dowry baffles the wooer.  
Of all the goodly doctrine that I from the pulpit heard  
My heart has never accepted so much as a single word.

**Al-Ma'arri**

### 35 The Prophets and the Priests

The Prophets, too, among us come to teach,  
Are one with those who from the pulpit preach;  
They pray, and slay, and pass away, and yet  
Our ills are as the pebbles on the beach.  
Islam does not have a monopoly on truth:

**Al-Ma'arri**

### 36 Fools Awake!

O fools, awake! The rites ye sacred hold  
Are but a cheat contrived by men of old  
Who lusted after wealth and gained their lust  
And died in baseness-and their law is dust.

**Al-Ma'arri**

### 37 A Little Doubt is Better

Traditions come from the past, of high import if they be True;  
Ay, but weak is the chain of those who warrant their truth.  
Consult thy reason and let perdition take others all:  
Of all the conference Reason best will counsel and guide.  
A little doubt is better than total credulity:

**Al-Ma'arri**

## Sources

1-32 Adapted from *Studies in Islamic Poetry* by Reynold A. Nicholson. Cambridge University Press, 1921, Cambridge, England.

33-37 From the Web Site of the Institute for the Secularization of Islamic Society ([ISIS](#)). This website has alternative translations for some of the verses translated by Nicholson.

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